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The Black Virgin

A Novel

By

Jel D. Lewis (Jones)

Author of "The Perfect Lady"

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Jel D. Lewis (Jones)

Author of *The Perfect Lady*

A CAPTIVATING ROMANCE NOVEL!

WRITER'S UNLIMITED PUBLISHING

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DEDICATION

To: This book is dedicated with my deepest love and gratefulness to my mother:

Ella Mae Jones (Noel)

Her unconditional love, trust, understanding and encouragement continues to embrace and support me in my journey as a poet, vocalist and new romance/ mystery author.

A very special "thank you" to Shirley Mae Woods (Jones), my sister and one of the most good-hearted people I know. It was her sincere, heart-warming encouragement about my stories that touched and motivated me more than any encouragement I have ever received.

PART ONE: **TEENAGERS IN LOVE**

Chapter One

The ad in the Sun Times read: Chicago, Illinois based hard rock band. We need: male vocalist, powerful trained voice, stage and studio experience, commanding stage presence, tall, lean long-haired image, professional attitude, 20-something and must be dead serious about taking on the musical world with everything you have.

Cooper answered the ad and when he drove across town to audition, that very cool and windy March evening, I was right by his side. This was the best opportunity for him yet. He had put so much work and practice into his singing career, and had looked all over the city and surrounding suburbs for a serious, well put-together band to connect with. He had cut his pre-med classes and work schedule in half to devote more time to his singing career.

Before graduating from Michael Reese medical assistance school together six months earlier, he always talked about how much he wanted to be a vocalist in a rock band. At first, I didn't take him serious. I would tease him and say, "Yes, I know. It's every man's dream to be a famous rock star. But I quickly stopped teasing him when I heard him sing. He sang Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing" for me while we were sitting in his backyard on a blanket one Saturday

and he did the song without any kind of music. And I was stunned at the beauty of his voice. His voice was powerful! His voice was touching! His voice was magical! His voice was like a voice from heaven, and I knew at that moment, that he was destined for fame.

When we were both hired as part-time medical assistants at Michael Reese medical center one month after graduation, he would always remind me that medicine fascinated him, because as a little boy, he had decided to grow up and be a doctor, a brain surgeon, just like his father. But yet, he always stressed how music was his first love. And the single most thing he talked about.

When we pulled up at the fancy driveway of the far north side address they had given Cooper over the phone, my eyes widened and I grabbed my head, wondering if he had written it down incorrectly. This place was a mansion. A huge three-story, yellow brick house with a guard dressed in white at the gate.

Cooper turned to me and shook his head, "Maryann, this can't be the right address. But I couldn't have written it down wrong," he said - pulling out his wallet to search for the piece of paper he wrote it down on.

He couldn't find the piece of paper and pushed his wallet back into his rear pocket. "I can't find the note I jotted it down on. But I was listening carefully." He paused at me, rubbing both hands down his hair as to make sure it was in place. "Believe me. I couldn't have written it down wrong." He smiled, straightening the collar of his olive green leather jacket. "But what gives? Are these guys already big wheels and rolling in dough? This place looks like it has more rooms than the White House."

I could hear the excitement in his voice, and see the sparkle in his eyes. He had high hopes for this appointment.

I squeezed Cooper's hand as the guard headed toward the car.

"May I help you, sir?" said the tall, heavy guard, sticking his head in the window on the passenger's side. His eyes were red and he didn't seem friendly.

I scooted closer to Cooper.

"Yes you can. We're looking for 7416 London Road."

Before Cooper could finish, the guard nodded.

"This is it. Would you happen to be Cooper Valentine?"

"That's me," Cooper grinned looking straight at the guard.

The guard frowned. Took his head out of the window and walked back toward the big house. He turned and beckoned for Cooper. Cooper's smile grew wider and he grabbed my face and kissed me before pushing the car door open. He was getting ready to step out without asking me out. But I grabbed his arm, and he looked at me and smiled. His eyes were saying "What are you waiting for? Let's go inside." But I still asked.

"Where do you think you're going? I'm not staying out here in the car. I came here with you, and I'm going to be with you through the audition."

He grinned and yanked on one of my curls in a playful manner. "Sure, girl. I wouldn't have it any other way," he said, pulling me out of his old black dodge on the driver's side.

As we followed the booze smelling guard, I felt a bit nervous. Yet I was very hopeful and very excited for Cooper. I had no doubt in my heart about this audition. Cooper would shine and bring them to their knees with his magnificent voice. Plus, he had the look and was the epitome of what any rock band would want representing them on center stage. He was tall, lean, 6 feet, baby green eyes, long wavy dark brown natural curls halfway down his back. His hair had never been cut since his tenth birthday. He knew he wanted long hair even before he knew he wanted to sing. He was gorgeous. And to top it all, he had a voice that could rock the world.

The guard showed us down the marble staircase to the basement which had been set up as this huge rehearsal room. We walked in and all heads turned. There were four good looking band members, and they all had long flowing shoulder length hair, styled like Michael Jackson's hair-do. Three of them had black hair, and one was an obvious bleached blonde. But the hair color became his light skin.

The four of them quickly walked up and shook Cooper's hand, exchanging looks and nodding at each other with smiles of approval. They had met their match. Someone who could outshine them.

I sort of just walked over and took a seat on a bench in the corner, and picked up a "Rolling Stone" magazine off the bench and busied myself looking through it. Cause it was plain to see that not one of the band members noticed I was even alive. And I didn't care about their rude behavior as long as Cooper got signed on. But as I sat there looking around the large purple room, I noticed how they were laughing and pouring sparkling Asti Spumante into glasses. One member who was wearing a blue jean jacket with a blue sash wrapped around his forehead, handed Cooper a glass of wine and patted his back. I was sitting too far away and the stereo volume was turned up too loud playing Michael Jackson's new L.P., "Thriller" for me to hear exactly what they were saying. But Cooper looked my way and held his glass out to me, offering me a glass, but I shook my head no. It was his appointment. His audition. His big break and I didn't want to be a distraction. I just wanted them to let him sign on the dotted line. But there was no need to worry, because just after they all toasted their wine glasses to Cooper and took one swallow, one member, who was wearing tight black jeans and a black leather vest, pulled the contract out of the inside pocket of his vest and handed it to Cooper along with a pen. They signed him up even before he did one song for them. And when he did sing, they laughed and cheered with approval. His great voice was just icing on the cake. It was plain to see, they were just looking for a lean figure and a pretty face to put center stage.

Six months down the road, Cooper had a two-bedroom skyscraper, living in the lap of luxury, just as he deserved, on the 40th floor of Chicago exclusive Lake Point Tower Apartments, a new apple red Porsche and a sporty white Jaguar, enough clothes to fill six closets and gold and diamonds out of this world. He looked like the glamorous famous entertainer that he was.

Chapter Two

After Cooper's first road trip over to Los Angeles, Seattle and New York City,which lasted for two months, he and the other band members were mobbed by reporters and screaming fans when they stepped off the plane at O'Hare Airport. I was all smiles and cheering to myself along with the TV crowd, while viewing their arrival live on the Channel 5 mid-day news, and straight from the airport he hopped a taxi and he rushed over to visit me. It was a cool, rainy Friday afternoon in October. Mama and Dad were both at work and Paul was at school.

We were sitting on the carpet in front of the television eating cheese and crackers along with some of the finest California white sparkling wine that he had brought back from his trip. For a while we held each other in silence and all we could hear was the sound of the fire crackling in the fireplace. The living room felt warm and cozy from the slow burn of the pine logs.

Wrapped in Cooper's arms was the only place I wanted to be. Being with him was my only dream. My only wish. My only hope. And my only prayer. I was just a teenager in love but I knew my feelings ran so deep that they would never die.

"Maryann, I'm having the time of my life. But you know, having all these things and money to burn doesn't really mean anything without someone to share it with." He tightened his grip around my shoulder and held me closer. "I guess I'm just tired of all the late night parties and groupies." He lifted my chin and held my face up toward his. "I want you. I love you, Maryann. Marry me. Let's do it baby! You pretty girl. Let's do it like - right now. Come be my wife and live with me in my tower in the sky," he grinned, placing his wine glass to his lips.

I was stunned. I loved him desperately. But I figured we would just keep dating and seeing each other whenever we could. I dared to rock the boat by mentioning any more of his time than he was already giving.

"Cooper," I said and just stared at him for a second, then I hollered, "Yes! But are you sure? Are you sure you want a wife at this time in your career? Because man." I grabbed my cheeks and grinned. "Nothing on God's green earth would make me happier! But I would wait, you know. Just knowing you want to marry me - means everything to me." I wiped my tears with my fingers, and I felt myself slightly trembling from excitement.

He kept his dreamy eyes on mine as he slowly took a sip of wine, then with great ease - placed his glass on the coffee table. And with the same ease, took my glass off the floor beside me, and placed it on the table next to his glass. Then with the same ease, he grabbed my hand gently and slowly pulled me up off the floor and into his arms. I could feel my body melt against his as he lifted my face with one strong hand and cupped the back of my neck in his palm as he invaded the warmth of my mouth with his ever gentle tongue. And very tender to the touch he took his free hand and pulled the white ribbon from my hair, to see my long black curls sweep across my shoulders, as he kissed me in such a demanding manner, and each kiss kept me wanting him more.

While gripped in his embrace, he softly muttered in my ear. "Yes, I'm sure, Miss Maryann Brooks."

He placed his tongue against my neck and kissed me there. All I could do was moan with pleasure from his electrifying touch. His presence filled me up with warmth - that overflowed from the mere touch of his hand.

"I'm more sure about marrying you than I am about anything else in this world. I was sure the first day my cousin Jimmie introduced us. When he pointed you out at the school's first season baseball game, I didn't watch my favorite team anymore, I watched you. One look in your eyes. Those angel brown eyes and I couldn't stop thinking about you. I think I fell in love with you on the spot. Because I was never the same after meeting you." He paused and pointed at me in the floor length mirror near the kitchen entrance. "What a perfect picture of radiant beauty. But I'll tell you a little secret," he whispered in my ear with his eyes on me in the mirror.

"And what secret may that be?" I whispered back.

"Well, it's as simple as this, Girl, I fell in love with your mind before I fell in love with your looks. You were the nicest, brightest, funniest, no nonsense chick I had ever laid eyes on. And I say chick, because that's what I used to call girls when I was a fast-talking 10th grader." He looked at me and winked.

"Oh, is that so," I grinned and winked back at him.

"But like I was saying, Maryann, after meeting you I was never the same," he said leading me over to the blue twin sofas to sit on his lap.

"Never! It was like you planted a star inside of my heart. A star that shines for you 24 hours a day. And you know what they say, a man's greatest fantasy is that which he creates in his own mind. And that there's nothing more powerful than the imagination. But if that is so, why is it that not one of the many thousands of daydreams I have had of you - come within a fracture of the glorious joy I feel from just looking in your eyes. Yes, Maryann. You stepped into my world and my heart became your property. I was always losing sleep and tossing and turning at night, wishing you were in my bed. And just the mere mentioning of your name would

set my heart on fire." He paused and placed his lips full against my left ear and licked me there, causing my insides to tingle.

"So you see, Maryann, I was sure that first day you gave me half of your ham and cheese sandwich in your 10th grade Math class. I was sure the first time you danced with me in my parent's basement. I was sure the first time we walked in the park hand-in-hand. I was sure the first time we counted the stars in the moonlight. But most of all, I was sure the first time your soft lips touched mine," he whispered against my throat, bringing his face up to claim my waiting lips, swallowing me up with his sweet, demanding mouth.

He pulled away and ran one finger down the middle of my chest as his face followed. "Yes, girl, I was sure the first time we held each other. The first time you smiled that pretty sexy smile. The first time you told me that your precious heart held love for only me," he uttered softly - grabbing my face with both hands, bringing his mouth down on mine, giving me a slow, easy tender kiss.

He pulled away and smiled, wiping my strawberry red lipstick away with his fingers, and licking his lips.

I was still silent. Still looking directly in his eyes. Still in somewhat of a daze from his proposal. My heart was pounding. My soul was singing. My head was screaming. My insides were overflowing with sensational hotness. His proposal was the answer to my dreams. The answer to all my prayers. The answer to my happiness!

I took my right hand and removed the remaining lipstick from his face. "Cooper you still have lipstick on your lips," I grinned.

"Well, what do you suppose I should do about that? Should I lick it off or should I press them against yours and saturate them more. I think the latter sounds good," he smiled, unbuttoning my first two buttons on my blouse. Placing his warm hand inside of my blouse, caressing one of my breasts.

We grinned at each other and I stared in his eyes with wonderment.

"I can see the seriousness in your eyes, and I know exactly what you are probably thinking," he nodded and smiled.

"For one, we are still just teenagers. We are young and all that stuff. Teenagers in love. And I know that many elders feel that teenage love is no big deal. And I'm sure our parents will say and wonder why have we decided to get married when we have our whole lives ahead of us to experience and learn about life. But that's just it, Maryann," he said, gripping my shoulder excitedly.

"I want only you. And frankly, what others may say or feel about our sudden engagement doesn't make any difference to me. But what does matter the utmost to me is making the most of my career and having you by my side. And believe me pretty woman. What I feel for you is a big deal. It's the biggest deal of my life. And it's second to none," he said, scooting me off his lap and standing to his feet. I remained sitting there on the sofa until he grabbed my hand and pulled me up into his arms in a crushing embrace. He held me tightly in his arms and whispered in my ear - so lovingly.

"Don't you know by now that you are what I breathe for! What I live for! What I smile for!" He laughed out, giving me a serious stare.

I laughed back, and asked, "What's so funny?"

"Girl, here I am being very serious about my feelings, and every word is just like a song." He gripped my face, planting a quick kiss on my lips.

We stared into each other's eyes and his sweet smile soothed me, as my overwhelming desire to have him ravish me made me tingle with anticipation.

"But that shouldn't surprise me, since it's you I sing for anyway. All my songs are about you, and I think you know that. Every word! Every sentence! Every paragraph! It's all about you. When I'm singing on stage, and I look out into the crowd, it's your pretty face I see, not out there among all those guests, but in my head--where you always are, no matter where I go." He paused and

winked at me.

"And I guess it's simple. Very simple to see why, since I'm filled up." He paused and patted his chest, "Filled up right here with you."

His hands grabbed my face again, placing his lips over mine, pushing his tongue in my mouth, swallowing me up with a long, soft, lingering kiss.

He pulled away and we smiled at each other. "Girl, Girl, you drive me crazy!"

He released my face and stepped back, pointing both hands to his chest with the most serious, yet passion-filled eyes. "And that I swear," he said softly.

I grabbed his hand and squeezed it, as sensational heat ripped beneath my skin. Then I started laughing, and he laughed too.

"What's so funny?" he asked, laughingly, with that same passion-filled look in his eyes.

He always had that look. And that look always excited me. But he had never tried to go all the way with me. And in the beginning when we first started dating, I was glad that he hadn't tried, because I wasn't ready then. But now that I was ready - I was hoping he would try.

I took my hand and removed his long hair from covering his left ear and tiptoed, whispering in his ear, "Let's go to my room."

"Let's go to your room? Is that what all this laughing is about? Okay, baby, lead the way," he said excitedly.

Then, I tried to make my reasons seem less obvious by saying, "And we both know, Paul will be getting home from school soon and I don't want him bugging you about driving your car to the mall. Because it seems, whenever you drop by lately, he's always trying to get a hold of your car keys, asking can he take a spin around the block. He has been one big pest about borrowing your car, every since you got the new cars. And I'm sure that bombs you out when he does. Cause no way are you going to let some 14-year-old crash your new Porsche. Right?" I asked.

He rubbed his chin, smiling, "Yeah, but it's just that, Paul has gotten to that age where he likes girls, and he knows they would be pretty impressed to see him sporting a new car," he paused. "Or should I say any school kid would be impressed to see a 14-year old sporting a new car, especially my Porsche," he grinned.

"Yes, I guess. But my little brother isn't like most boys. All he seems to care about is trying to work on cars and figuring out what makes other things tick. I have yet to see him talking to some girl."

I grabbed his hand and led him through the kitchen and down the hallway to my spacious cozy room.

Walking down the hallway to my room seemed like the longest walk. My insides were screaming out for Cooper. And when we reached my room, I turned the doorknob and he pushed me in the room, grabbed me in his arms falling up against the closed door, with me in his arms and his lips against mine. He released me and I almost fell to the floor.

"Now that I have you here in your room tucked away behind closed doors, I just want to look at you, Maryann. Being away from you drives me nuts, and that's what I really don't like about the road trips. But it doesn't matter how far away I am from you, my thoughts are focused on you. You are always with me, girl. For all the beautiful girls that come my way, maybe I would look twice, if there was just one, among the millions, who looked as radiant as you. I'm the rock star in your eyes and the eyes of the world. But just that tiny twinkle in your eyes could totally outshine any star. You are by far, one in a million and I don't have to live 19 more years to know I'm never gonna find another girl in this lifetime who could ever touch my heart and light up my world or who would come within a close second to what I feel for you." His eyes melted into mine.

"Cooper, please," I managed breathless as we faced each other. He had that look in his eyes. My desire for him overwhelmed me.

"Cooper, I was just thinking. Since we are here in my room all tucked away behind my locked bedroom door, please make love to me now. We have waited so long. I don't want to wait anymore." I paused in his eyes, "I've been thinking about this and thinking about this, and I know I'm ready." I nodded as he was rubbing his chin giving me a sexy stare. "I love you so much, Cooper. And I just want to be with you like that," I grinned grabbing my face.

With those words, like a whirlwind, he had me wrapped in his arms, kissing my throat as his slender fingers went wild in my bouncy "Shirley Temple" hair-do. A hair-do that cost $45.00 each setting, but held for only four days after leaving the salon.

I placed my arms around his shoulders, as his lips brushed the tip of my nose, as he sought my parted lips, giving me a sweet, tender passion-filled kiss. Then he pulled away, and looked down at me as he held my neck in his soft, strong hands.

"Maryann, this is just the beginning. And when we make love it's going to be special; and believe me, I would love nothing more than to strip naked with you right here and now, and die in your sweet arms from the sheer pleasure of you." He paused and we grinned at each other.

"But baby," he shook his head. No matter how much I may want to make love to you. And believe me, my want for your body is the greatest desire that my soul has ever had." He paused and kissed my nose, "I could never make love to you right here and now--in your bedroom like this. For one, it wouldn't be special enough, and no time for you would be special enough except your wedding night," he said, holding me at arms-length, glancing swiftly down the length of my body, as if he could see through my ankle-length winter-white lace skirt. And his eyes burned with desire, as the frustration of holding out showed on his face.

"Well, what about?" I snickered.

He looked at me and smiled, waiting for me to finish my question.

"I'm waiting. What about what" he asked curiously, with a

sexual undertone.

"Well, I was just wondering," I snickered again.

"Are you going to finish that question and tell me what you're snickering about or what?" he laughed.

"Well, you could do the other thing," I blurted out quickly in a low, nervous voice.

"What thing is that, Maryann?" he laughed.

"You know what thing."

"No. I don't. I'm asking you, Girl," he kept giving me that sexy look.

He reached out and caressed one of my curls in his hand, and all I could do was stand there and tremble, breathing in his sensuous cologne.

"If you'll say what thing you're talking about, Maryann, then maybe I'll oblige you. Come on Girl. Say it. What thing is that I can do?" He tickled me under the chin and my lips quivered to his touch.

I covered my face with both hands, tickled, aroused and embarrassed, to actually say the word he was trying to get me to say. Then I uncovered by eyes and shook my head at him.

"No. I'm not going to say that word. Let's forget it, Cooper. Okay," I grinned.

"Say it, Maryann. I got to get you to say some of these hot words. Because you are always embarrassed about some words," he winked and blew me a kiss. "Okay, here's the deal," he kept giving me that sexy stare.

"Okay, I'm listening," I mumbled.

"I'm going to make this a little bit easier for you, Girl. What I'm going to do is ask you what letter it starts with, okay?"

I nodded, "Yes."

"So, Maryann, if you just tell me what letter the word starts with, I'll go as far as saying it for you. Do we have a deal or what?" He tickled under my chin again, totally excited about getting me to say the word.

"Cooper. No," I laughed.

"No? What do you mean, Girl? I'm trying to get you to say some of these sexy words that you are so embarrassed to say. Cause I think deep down you really want to say them, just like I would like to hear you say them. You just need some help, Baby. So, if you'll just tell me what letter it begins with, like I promised, I'll say the word."

"But, Cooper. I don't want to say it and I don't want you to say it, cause I'm all embarrassed now."

"Come on, Baby. Does the other thing mean...." I placed my hand against his mouth, cutting off his words.

He held my hand against his mouth and licked my palm. I shivered from the softness of his lips against my hand and I thought I would explode with passion.

He looked at me and winked as he continued to hold my hand against his lips, kissing and licking my palm, as I stood at arms-length.

"This is what you meant about the other thing? Right?"

I nodded and smiled, as I was melting, lost in his eyes.

"So, what do you say?" I managed in a shaky, nervous voice.

"I say, 'Hell yes,'" then there was the longest pause as he was lost in my eyes. "Except, we have one major problem, Girl,"

"What's that?"

"I can't trust myself to do what you are asking me to do down there," he touched my stomach, shaking his head.

"It's getting hot in here," he teased with his eyes glued to mine, unbuttoning three buttons on his blue silk shirt. And as if I wasn't enticed enough, seeing his bare, hairy chest which was streaked with sweat just drained my strength.

"What I'm trying to say, Baby, is I want you so much, I wouldn't be able to stop at kissing your stomach, or kissing your thigh. I would want all of you. And that's why we got to wait until our wedding night, Girl," he inhaled sharply.

"Cause, Maryann, I don't just want some of you any of the

time. I want all of you, all of the time. You hear me, Baby. All of you! Every single inch of you," he whispered in my ear, touching my earlobe with his tongue, tracing ever so tenderly to my lips, placing his mouth over mine, kissing me deep and rapturously.

We took a seat on the edge of my bed and faced each other. But within the bat of an eye, he stood to his feet, gathering me up in his arms tightly.

"If you have an hour to spare I can tell you all about the vision in my head of our first time," he said softly with that look of desire still heavy in his eyes.

He paused for a second and smiled at me. "I think you're going to like what I'm about to say."

I hit his shoulder in a playful manner and laughed out.

"Well go on! Tell me! I'm dying to hear." I grabbed his arm, tiptoeing to place my mouth against his, then he pushed his soft tongue between my lips, entering my mouth to swallow me up in a quick deep kiss.

He pulled away laughing. "Okay. Hold on. Control yourself woman," he teased and touched my nose.

"It has to be on a warm summer night, and in the middle of the woods," he pauses and smiles looking deep into my eyes. "And it has to be when all the stars and the moon lights up the sky, "he pauses for a second and rubs his finger across his chin. "And you know what else girl, it has to be near the lake or any large body of water. We will spread out our blanket right beside the banks of the water and lie there completely unclothed." He smiled and touched my hand which I had just placed over my eyes.

"Why are you covering your eyes? You are blushing. We wouldn't be shy, would we?" He paused and pulled my hand away from my face.

"I can't believe you're shy,' he teased. "I haven't even gotten started yet," he laughed.

"I'm not shy. Don't be silly. If you can dish out the hot romance we're going to have on our first time, I can take it." I

looked straight in his sexy eyes and winked.

"Okay, since I have your permission and full attention, I will continue.

"We'll be lying on the blanket wrapped in each others arms while listening to the sounds of the night and the waves of the lake. We'll be breathing in the fresh night air and each other. But Maryann, all night alone anywhere wouldn't be enough time to hold you and kiss you and make love to you," he said in a whisper, leaning forward to kiss my nose.

I held his hands and whispered to him, "Cooper, you are my knight in shining armor. My prince charming. Everything I have ever dreamed of in a man. So incredible. Sometimes I have to pinch myself to make sure you're real and I'm not dreaming."

He grinned and placed his lips full against mine, brushing them against mine gently, before softly placing his tongue in my mouth to kiss me long and tenderly.

Shortly, we were on the carpet kissing and touching each other, as if we had never kissed or touched each other before. We paused between kisses just long enough to catch our breath and lock lips again. And after we were both excited to the point of screaming, he released me and rolled over on his back and grabbed his face.

"Girl." He grinned. "You keep driving me crazy like this. I feel like ripping your clothes off right now." He looked toward me and nodded, smoothing my hair out of my face. Then he touched my lips and traced them with his smooth fingers and smiled.

"And from the looks of what you are wearing, getting you out of your clothes shouldn't be too much of a hassle."

I looked him straight in the eyes as I laid there on the floor beside him and said a silent prayer that he would do exactly what he had just said.

"Go on. Rip my skirt off. I dare you. I double dare you," I said, slipping my hands under his shirt to rub his chest.

He looked at me and smiled, shaking his head.

"Our wedding night - remember?" He shook his finger at my

nose and grabbed my nose- shaking it gently. "That's the night I'll get you, pretty girl. And believe me, baby. I'm gonna make you scream," he said in a teasing manner.

I hit his shoulder in a playful way and pouted.

"Why can't we do it now?"

"We can't do it now because we are going to wait until we are husband and wife. We will be in our bed and in our house, and I'm going to turn you every which way but loose," he said lifting up my pink lace blouse, taking a quick peep at my bare breast.

He fell back and grabbed his head, staring straight at the ceiling. "Yes, baby. 1985 is turning out to be a very good year. And man don't we know," he paused and rubbed his hands together. "It's going to get better."

Later that night, while lying on the sofa in my room, Cooper was my every thought. I kept thinking about all the fun, sexy things we had talked about.

I looked toward the window and noticed the moon shining bright and instantly I thought of Cooper's vision of our first time. I walked over to the window and cracked it just far enough to stick my head out to breathe in the clean night air. I noticed all the stars and suddenly my entire body warmed. I had the greatest sensation for Cooper to make love to me. The clock on my moonlit wall read 10:30 pm. He was probably with the band practicing.

I managed to undress and slip into bed without calling to see if he was home. After lying in bed for only a few minutes, I started to feel relaxed and warm from the wine we had drunk earlier. And just as I turned on my right side and closed my eyes, I heard the door crack and close. I sat right up and grabbed my mouth as a tall shadow stood in the corner of my room. Then the shadow walked closer toward the center of the room and from the moonlight shining through my window, I could see it was Cooper. I grabbed my face and laughed.

"What are you doing sneaking up on me this time of night? I didn't hear the doorbell. Who opened the door and let you in?" I

asked - all smiles.

But he didn't answer as he dropped his black leather jacket on the carpet. He took a seat on the bed and before I could say a word, he grabbed my face and our tongues touched hotly, and he sucked my tongue deep into the softness of his mouth. He massaged his fast fingers in my hair, trailing his smooth lips from my mouth to the back of my neck. He smothered my neck and throat with quick, tender, hot kisses, one after the other. His warm, smooth urgent lips excited me desperately.

I felt weak with pleasure, gripping his broad shoulders as his warm, soft lips pulled away from mine and he stood to his feet, standing over my bed smiling down at me with hot desire in his eyes. Without saying a word, he slowly took a seat on the edge of the bed next to me again and softly kissed my left ear, touching it with his tongue - reaching for the top button of my long silky white nightgown. He slipped it over my head and threw it on the floor.

I was just sitting there, almost trembling from anticipation as we sat face to face with his lips just inches away from mine. I was smiling, excited in the sweetest way. Then suddenly he was standing again. He still hadn't uttered one word as he smiled down at me. His sexy eyes burned with passion. I sat there with the covers over me, and before I realized it, Cooper had pulled the covers back - revealing my bright red satin underwear. From the look on his face, I thought he would explode from the sight of me. But he stood back and pulled off his black snake skin boots, then started unbuttoning his black silk shirt. His eyes never left mine.

He draped his shirt over the back of the straight wicker chair next to the bed, and with the same patience, he slowly unzipped his black slacks and stepped out of them.

"Ready or not, here I come," he grinned, crawling into bed next to me.

His warm hands gently gripped my shoulders and placed me back on the pillow, bringing his mouth down on mine, kissing me deep and forceful, wrapping me tight in his solid arms. I could feel

his powerful thighs and the outline of his strong silky body pressed against mine. Every ounce of passion within me was silently screaming out for his touch. Every muscle and nerve within me had relaxed and surrendered itself to Cooper, to his sweet passion, to his urgent kisses, to his gentle silky touch and forceful body. And as he held me next to him, I felt myself slowly inch by inch melting away.

"Maryann, the feel of your skin is unreal," he whispered, trailing warm, soothing kisses down my shoulder to my fingertips. "And the pretty scent of you is so powerful. I could just die in your arms tonight from shear pleasure," he said in a low sensuous voice, placing his moist lips full on my belly-button, rubbing his face across my stomach.

My power had been drained. Bit by bit his touch drained me of all my strength and replaced it with hungry, raw desire.

As he whispered his undying need and love for every inch of my body he kissed, I closed my eyes and savored each moment, and suddenly all the things he had described earlier were in my head. I visualized us lying on a blanket in the woods, with the star-filled night, with the sound and smell of the lake, the singing of the crickets, the soft, swaying sound of the trees blowing in the wind.

I focused back as heat ripped through my skin, as Cooper's demanding, delicate hands slowly removed my underwear. And as my panties hit the floor, I whispered in his ear.

"What happened to waiting until our wedding night? Not that I'm complaining. I'm glorified you canned that idea."

"Maryann. This is our wedding night. As of this night forward in my heart, we are husband and wife. So Maryann. Baby," he whispered. "Will you take me Cooper Valentine to be your husband from this night forward?"

Just as I caught my breath to answer yes, the ringing of the phone on the nightstand next to my bed startled me, and quickly grabbing it caused me to fall out of bed. When I hit the floor, so did the receiver. I was calling out for Cooper.

"Cooper, where are you?"

I couldn't see a thing in my pitch dark room. The clouds had apparently rolled in and covered the moon that had been shining so brightly through my window. Then I heard his voice in a low, faint tone say, "I'm on the other end of the receiver. Where do you think I am, under your bed? Pick up the phone, will you?"

"Oh, no. I was dreaming," I thought, putting the receiver to my ear.

"I'm sorry. I dropped the phone. You woke me up from the most exciting dream of my entire life. It was about us. We were just seconds from doing it. It was so real."

"Is that right? So we were just seconds away? That sounds good, Maryann, and coming soon, the day you walk down that aisle and become Mrs. Cooper Valentine.

"Cooper, I'm going crazy waiting. Our wedding seems like light years away," I pouted through the receiver.

"Oh, by-the-way, listen to this. I just finished writing a song about you. It's called, "She'll Be Mine," he relayed excitedly.

"Oh, man, that's really neat. Do you mention my name in the song?" I asked.

"No, I don't mention your name. But believe me, pretty girl, it's all about you. Just listen for awhile and I'll sing you the lyrics:

She'll Be Mine
She'll be mine, Just like the sky
Will be forever high above
She'll be my only love.

She'll be mine,
Just like the rain that bonds to the sea
She'll be that constant Joy with me.

She'll be mine, Just like the stars to the clear night
She'll be my treasure
That glows with the brightest light.

Chapter Three

During Cooper's two weeks' vacation away from the band, it rained and thunder stormed almost every single day. But not even the rain and grey skies could dampen our spirits. We were busy making wedding plans and talking about our honeymoon. His mother was giving me a 100-year-old family treasure to walk down the aisle in. It was Cooper's great, great grandmother's ivory lace wedding gown.

One week after he returned to work, he pulled in front of the house right at dinnertime and beeped his horn twice. That was something he had never done before. I rushed to the front door and stuck my head out. He had his head lying on the steering wheel. And he didn't look my way.

"Just a second," I hollered. "Let me grab my jacket."

I ran down the hallway to my room and grabbed my coat out of the closet. Mama was looking out of the window when I reached the living room.

"Maryann. What's going on? Is Cooper okay? He's out there with his head down on the steering wheel. And for as long as the two of you been going out, I have never known him to pull up in front of the house and blow his horn," Mama said with concern in her eyes.

I threw on my jacket and shook my head. "Mama, I don't know what's wrong with Cooper. But something is wrong. Don't hold dinner. I gotta go," I said, pulling the door open and running outside.

Mama stood there in the door and looked out at us as I hopped in on the passenger's side. Cooper started the engine and she stuck her head back inside and closed the front door. But before I could say one word, he stepped on the gas and burned rubber down the street to his apartment.

As we stepped into his apartment, he threw his car keys on the floor and slammed the door hard, knocking his wall clock to the floor.

"Maryann, you'll never believe what the band laid on me today! Cause I can't believe this shit myself!" he yelled, rushing toward the kitchen.

I was still standing in the middle of the living room floor wearing my coat when I heard the refrigerator door slam. He stepped back into the living room with a ten ounce bottle of sparkling wine up to his lips. He drained the last drop and threw the bottle against the door, dropping down on the sofa. I could see tears in his clear eyes. I grabbed my chest as I dropped down on my knees in front of him. I was trembling as I traced his sad face with my hand and kissed him. I was afraid to ask what had happened. But he wasn't telling me and I had to find out what had crushed him like that.

"Cooper. Baby. I'm here. Please talk to me and tell me what's wrong. What happened with the band?" I touched his face.

His watery eyes locked with mine, but he didn't mumble a word. He brushed my hand away and flew off the sofa, grabbed his keys from the floor and tore out of the door. He left me there on the

floor in his huge apartment with only my tears and imagination for comfort. I was as much in the dark about what was bothering him as I was when he first picked me up.

Just yesterday everything seemed so perfect. Something major had occurred to upset him so, and what frightened me, it had to be something big. Cause Cooper was easygoing and the type who never let much get under his skin.

An hour later, around 7:30 pm that night, Cooper put his key in the lock. I was still sitting there on the carpet in front of the sofa, still wearing my coat where he had left me. He closed the door with ease and gave me a smile laced with love. Then as he noticed my tears, he rushed across the floor to me. He dropped to his knees and kissed my face over and over, then placed his mouth over mine, as he kissed me long and tenderly. He pulled away and looked deep into my eyes.

"Maryann, I'll never give you up!"

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. Because I wouldn't want you to give me up. Because Cooper Valentine what would we do without each other? We're stuck like glue to each other," I said laughingly, as I reached out and held his face.

"And that's the way it's gonna stay," he snapped, ripping his face out of my hands, jumping to his feet with deep sadness in his eyes. He took a seat on the sofa and lowered his head with both hands covering his face.

I immediately knew he was still upset about whatever had happened earlier. I slowly got off the floor and slipped out of my coat, throwing it over the back of the sofa as I took a seat next to him.

"Cooper, please! Tell me what's bothering you," I said in a low, sad voice, rubbing his hand.

He uncovered his face and looked me right in the eyes. The sad, tortured look in his eyes scared me.

"Baby, it's all over. It's all over. Everything is finished. I can pack up right now, cause I sure won't be able to stay in this

fancy skyscraper. But I'm keeping the Porsche," he uttered sadly in somewhat of a daze.

I grabbed his arm in confusion and anger. "Cooper, what are you talking about? Talk to me in plain English! Please! Tell me what in the hell are you talking about!"

My anger had pulled his anger to the surface, and he sprung off the sofa. He paced back and forth a couple times, then he raised both hands and pointed at himself.

"Well! If you must know! Your all-time, big time vocalist! Can't lose, lady killer, rock star, so they called me! I'm washed up! I'm a has been! My dream just went down the drain!" he yelled, picking up the TV remote and sailed it with all his strength across the room, crushing it against the wall.

"It took all four of them about 20 minutes among them to tell me so long. And after all the hard work and sweat I put into that band. It took 20 lousy minutes to kick me out! He shook his head and headed toward the kitchen. "I need another drink!" he hollered.

I heard the refrigerator door slam hard, and he rushed back into the living room with another ten ounce bottle of sparkling wine up to his lips - draining the bottle as he stepped toward me.

"You heard me, didn't you, Maryann? Twenty lousy minutes was all it took for Tanner and the group to say 'Get lost, buddy! We'll call you. Don't call us!' They didn't want to hear anything I had to say or how I felt! It didn't matter! It was all about what they wanted!"

I just stood there in tears looking at my gorgeous, broken man. My heart had cracked into a 100 pieces. All I could do was hold my cheeks and cry. Then I managed to utter.

"Sweetheart, did they give you a reason for kicking you out of the band and ripping up your contract?" I asked calmly - trying not to set him off anymore than he was.

My question seemed to cause him more rage. I had never seen him so upset and heartbroken before. He ran and grabbed the 16 x 20 photo of the band members and shattered it into a thousand

pieces against the fireplace mantel.

"So long to you, too! You 'Middle Ground' phonies! I hope you sink in your own bull shit!" he yelled loudly.

I walked up to him and threw my arms around his waist.

"Cooper, please stop. You have me. I love you. And all I can say is that Mark, Tanner, Freddie and Stuart must be out of their minds to let you go. You brought that band the look and fame they have today! You joined the group and almost singlehandedly put "Middle Ground" at the top of the charts in just two months after their first release!"

He looked down at me with sad, watery eyes and shook his head.

"Maryann, you are so precious. From the moment I first saw you, I knew you were special. And I knew I wanted you to be mine. And I knew I would fall in love with you and love you forever. Freddie and the gang could live a thousand years and would never find anyone like you. Yet, do you know, they had their damn nerve to ask me to call off our wedding?"

I stumbled backward from Cooper and grabbed my stomach as I swallowed hard. And he continued.

"All four members said right after rehearsal tonight that I either cancel our wedding or them. They told me some bull - that marrying you right now would mess with the band image. I thought they were just kidding at first, but it took about 30 seconds to see they were dead serious when Freddie and Mark pointed to the fine print on the contract. It read: 'No member of "Middle Ground" can take a wife without further notice," he said sadly shaking his head.

"Cooper, oh, Cooper, they didn't? How could they be so scandalous to ask you to even consider such garbage, just to keep a job?" I said tearfully, grabbed my cheeks and squeezed them. I was fuming, bursting with rage for every low-down member of "Middle Ground." "So you told them you wouldn't cancel the wedding and that's when they gave you your walking papers? Those unsympathetic bastards! How dare they do this to you? And how

can they pull something like this, sweetheart, and get away with it? Isn't there anything you can do to fight them against this? We got to do something! We can't just let them rip your heart out and hand it back to you. You worked too hard to get where you are - to let those unseemly whores destroy your career!"

"No, baby." He shook his head sadly. "There's nothing we can do. Cause the one thing they want from me, I would lie down and die before I would honor their wishes. So there's nothing else we can do. Nothing! Those back stabbers furnished me with everything. You know I had nothing when I walked into that band.."

"Maybe not Sweetheart, but you darn sure contributed a lot. I mean, just look how famous and well known they are since you joined nine months ago."

He listened, but didn't respond as he stared into the fireplace with a crushed spirit.

"Sweetheart, don't let those egotistical, unscrupulous sluts get away with what they're trying to pull. We can call Mr. Otis Cox. He's a lawyer friend of Janet's. We can call Mr. Cox and this way Tanner them will know you're not going to take this mess lying down."

He held up one hand and shook his head, "No, Baby. Don't bother."

"But, Cooper. He'll help us. You'll see."

"No. Don't call Mr. Cox! Don't call anybody. Okay. Please," he stressed strongly.

"Okay. Okay. I won't call but I think you should fight for your career. Go lay it on the line! Make them realize how losing you will really hurt the band. The fans come to hear and see you on center stage!" I pleaded, picking the box of Kleenex up from the coffee table to dry my eyes..

"Go and tell those skirt chasing bastards that! Please! I know how much you love being on stage and singing and I know how much you love me. But you shouldn't have to choose," I pleaded in tears, with extreme distress and hurt stabbing me inside.

I was so torn and mortified over the band's actions.

He grabbed my shoulders and pulled me in holding me close, patting my back.

"Don't do this. Stop crying, please. Seeing you cry just makes my blood boil more! And I get more pissed by the minute with all of those damn philanderers," he took a deep breath. But don't you know, I did fight! When they told me I was out if I didn't call off the wedding, I brought up all the things you just mentioned about the fans, the crowds wanting to hear and see me. But those bastards laughed in my face." His arms tightened around me as I rested my face against his chest, listening to his heart pound in anguish.

"But I really gave them something to laugh about when I punched Mark in the nose for pointing his finger in my face, saying, 'Get over it already! Man! Do what you have to do, and things will be cool again.'"

"So you smacked the mess out of Mark?" I managed a slight smile, shaking my head. "But you shouldn't have punched him. He's not even worth it."

"Don't I know, Baby. But when he pointed his finger at me, using that arrogant tone of his, the next thing I knew, I had landed a fist in his face. And before I walked out of the door, they said they would prefer to keep me as their vocalist, but losing me would pose no problems for them, since, so they put it, you have given us the fame and name we needed! Now all we have to do is find another pretty face who looks similar to you and dress him in your outfits and the public will never know it's not Cooper Valentine on stage. Can you believe it Maryann? That's what they had the damn audacity to say to me!" He hit his fist in his hand.

Two evenings later, after Cooper and I pulled into my driveway after work, before he could kill the motor, Mama stuck her head out the front door and hollered.

"Maryann. Janet is on the phone. She says it's important."

I stuck my head out the car window and hollered back,

"Okay, Mama. Tell her to hold on. I'll be right there."

I turned to Cooper, kissed him against the face, grinning.

"Wait here. I'll be right back. I got to see what Janet wants," I mumbled, unlocking my seat belt, hurrying out of the car. Then stuck my head in the window, kissing Cooper again.

"I may be awhile, cause after I speak to Janet, I want to pull this uniform off."

"Okay. Baby. Take your time. I'll be here listening to a few sounds. And tell Janet I said to be cool. And the four of us got to hook up again real soon," he grinned and kissed his finger, placing it against my lips.

I headed inside and he waved at Mama and Paul as they both stood there in the front door. And as I headed up the steps to the porch, Paul headed down the steps toward Cooper.

"What's up, Man? Do you have Boy George's new cut?" Paul asked.

"Maryann," Mama called me as I headed toward my room to grab the phone. I glanced back and she was headed down the hallway toward me, I stood still.

"Yeah, Mama," I asked.

"I'm getting ready to head to Dominicks for a couple things and I also have to stop at Walgreens, so if you're here when your Daddy gets in from work, tell him that when I get back from shopping we're going to be ordering pizza for dinner."

"Okay, Mama. If I leave with Cooper, I'll tell Paul to tell him."

"Okay. I'm leaving now. I'll be back soon."

I grabbed the phone and plopped down on the love seat in my room.

"Janet, are you still there?" I laughed.

"Yes. I'm still holding on."

"I'm sorry about that. What's up? Mama said you had mentioned to her that it was important."

"Yes, girl friend. It is. I'm trying to make a decision about

something that's racking my brain."

"What is it, Girl?" I asked curiously.

"It's about sex."

I grabbed my mouth. "Janet! You mean doing it? You mean sex, sex. Sex with a boy and girl - all the way sex?" I shouted.

"Yes. Maryann. But what do you sound so surprised for? You are engaged to Cooper so I figured maybe you guys had. But from the way you sound, I guess you haven't."

"Janet. We have decided to wait until after the wedding. And I guess, I should add, the waiting was Cooper's idea."

"He what? He chose to wait? Why? Girl, you better set a fire under that boy, and get him all heated up."

"Are you kidding? A fire is the last thing Cooper needs. He's hot enough. Believe me. But I think he wants to wait because he thinks I'm not ready. But, Janet. I am ready. I'm so in love, I'm dying to go all the way with him."

"Maryann. I have the same problem. I'm ready too. But my situation is different."

"What do you mean? You and Jimmie love each other, right?"

"That's the problem, Maryann. I love him. But I'm not sure how deep his feelings are for me. But I do know one thing, Girl. I do want to go to bed with him," she paused. "So what do you think? You think I should do it?"

"Well, I don't know. Janet. This is a decision you got to make for yourself. The only advice I can give you is to be sure to use a condom if you do decide."

"You know, Maryann. I did let him kiss me below the belly button once," she said excitedly.

"Janet! You did? How was it?" my face warmed as the receiver trembled against my ear from excitement.

"It was out of this world. Glorious! It made me feel so relaxed unlike anything I have ever felt. That's why I'm ready to take the next step, Maryann."

"Janet, I'm getting all tingly inside just hearing you tell me about it."

"So, Maryann, I know Cooper has gone down on you before," she giggled.

"How I wish," I replied in a low voice.

"You mean you guys haven't even done that?"

"No. Nothing. I'm still waiting. But remember what I said, if and when you decide to go all the way, don't forget the condom," I stressed seriously.

"Okay. I will if I decide. So I guess I'll let you go."

"Yeah. Because I got to change out of my work uniform, I got Cooper waiting outside in his car. And before we hang up, he said to tell you to be cool and that the four of us got to get together again real soon."

"Okay. Tell him, I said hello. I'll talk to you later."

I hung the phone up quickly and grabbed a pair of jeans and a turtle neck out of my dresser drawer, rushing down the hall to the bathroom, and just as I stepped into the bathroom, the phone rang. I grabbed the receiver on the bathroom wall.

"Hello."

"Maryann. It's me again."

"Janet, what is it? I got to get dressed and out of here."

"I just called to say, tonight is the night. I'm going to do it."

"Janet. You are? Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm very sure. I thought about it, and I don't see any reason to wait longer. Plus I know how to protect myself, and I'm in love with the man. So Girl Friend after tonight, you'll be the last virgin on this block."

"Yes. I know. But not for long. Cooper and I will be walking down that aisle before you know it. And in the meantime, who knows, our honeymoon may just come before the wedding," I snickered through the receiver.

After hanging up with Janet and closing the bathroom door, I heard loud voices, I pulled the curtains back and peeked out while

unzipping and unbuttoning my clothes. I could see that Mark had pulled up in his silver Mercedes, standing against his car with two of the cheerleaders from my college, Sara James and Cathy Thomas.

I grabbed my mouth with fright and my face warmed when I could see that they were exchanging harsh words. Plus I knew how furious Cooper was with Mark and the rest of the group.

"I don't want your damn pity. What I think of your deal is this!" Cooper roared sticking up his middle finger.

"Look! Man! Try to be reasonable! We need you! Just postpone things for a few months. What's so unreasonable about that?" Mark spoke calmly with a tinge of cruelty in his voice.

Cooper glanced from Mark to the girls he was with and paused up at the overcast sky, then back to the girls.

"I don't mean you girls any disrespect. So I would suggest that you step back into the car, keep the windows up and blast the music. Because what I'm about to say, no woman needs to hear."

The girls exchanged looks with Mark and he nodded, "Yes." And by the time they took a seat and turned the music up, Cooper stepped toward Mark, looking him straight in the eye, toe-to-toe, and when he clenched both fists, I knew I had to hurry into my clothes and get outside before they threw any punches.

"Man! You guys have made yourselves crystal clear on the matter. So don't further insult me by running over here thinking there could be some further collaboration between us! Did I make myself clear, Mark?" he shouted angrily in Mark's face.

Mark took two steps backward, shaking his head.

"Cooper. This is ridiculous what we are doing. Colleagues are supposed to be able to work together. Man! We should at least be able to compromise. So man, why not calm down and let's talk like the two businessmen that we are," Mark suggested, sharply.

"Okay! Mark. You want to talk business. I'll talk business." Cooper paused down at the ground, then focused back in Mark's eyes. "Business issue number one," he pointed his finger in Mark's face. "What I do in my personal life is none of yours or the

group's damn concern."

"Look! Cooper. We may have come off as cold and calculating, but we just have the group's best interest at heart. We just thought you could postpone the wedding."

"See, Mark! That's the damn problem. I will not compromise on my marriage! Did you get that? I will not!" Cooper shouted in his face.

I could see the sudden anger and disappointment in Mark's eyes as he rubbed his chin, shaking his head.

"Cooper! No bitch ass is worth throwing your damn career away for! You would think this chick has gold laced on...."

Before Mark could finish his statement, Cooper socked him in the left jaw, causing Mark to stagger about, as Cooper grabbed him in the collar and yelled bitterly.

"You revolting piece of garbage! You're no better than the trash I throw out!"

Paul stepped up and tried to pull Cooper off of Mark, and when Cooper did release his grip, Mark landed a forceful punch against the side of Cooper's shoulder.

"You self-righteous son-of-a-bitch! Who needs your whining ass! Always complaining about this or that and the other! Everything has to be straight-laced for you. So forget my offer! The hell with you! Go marry your little princess, and I hope she keeps you henpecked for the rest of your fucking life!"

They were throwing punches left and right, while Paul was trying to pull them apart, but couldn't quite manage. Then, suddenly, Cooper punched Mark in the stomach and when Mark leaned forward and grabbed his stomach, Cooper planted a roaming fist against his chest. And half bent over, Mark found strength to sock Cooper twice in the stomach.

By now I had dressed, storming outside to find Mark sailing face down to the ground. Cooper was very exhausted but grabbed him up and threw him into his car on the back seat, slamming the car door hard.

"Now, get the hell out of here! And don't ever come around me talking that kind of bull again!" he relayed angrily.

One of the cheerleaders, Sara James, started up his engine, and burned rubber going out of my driveway.

The following evening, while headed over to "Middle Ground's" big house, Cooper seemed unusually quiet. But he didn't really seem upset. He just wasn't talking much. And I wasn't talking much either. But I was beside myself with anxiety that upon this meeting there would be another fight. But this was a visit that he had to make, since he had to pick up his things from their house: a couple stage outfits and, etc.

When we pulled up to the gate, I noticed the guard wasn't there and the gate was stretched open. Cooper kissed the side of my forehead, squeezed my left hand, pushing his door open, as I still sat there nervous and quiet with my eyes glued to him.

He put one foot out of the car and turned to me.

"Don't worry, Maryann. I learned my lesson yesterday. I'm not about to get into another knock down brawl with Mark or any of the rest of them. But if it will make you feel any better, when I called, Freddie answered the phone and said it would be cool to pick up my things, and he mentioned that Mark wasn't home, and wouldn't be for sometime," he said, caressing one of my curls.

"So, this should be pretty smooth and easy. I'll go inside and get my things and be back in a flash," he touched my chin with reassurance in his eyes.

I nodded, "Hurry back."

"I will, Girl. Sit tight," he closed the door easily, keeping his eyes on mine, backing away.

"I'll be right back, don't worry."

I leaned over on the driver's side, sticking my head out as he stepped through the gates.

"I want to come with you," I pouted.

"No way," he shook his head, strutting quickly back to the car.

"Maryann. We talked about this thing and you agreed with me, that those guys who live in that big house up there," he pointed to the house.

"They have no respect for women the way they swear and curse and use all that vulgar language," he shook his head, zipping up his wind breaker.

"So, if you want me to walk in there and get my things and leave, I would suggest strongly that you just stay put," he suggested with a straight face.

"Okay," I mumbled, shaking my head.

"You know I'm right, Girl. Cause if they ever used any of that vile language in front of you, you talking about a knock down brawl, that goes without saying," he paused down at the driveway, resting both arms hanging inside the window.

"Maryann. I think you already know, this whole thing got me pretty ripped up inside, yes? But, Baby. You also know I'm above all this hitting and throwing punches. But Maryann," he leaned into the window and kissed me.

"I would protect your honor against all odds. Because you are my woman, and I love you like I love my own life," he paused, gazing into my eyes.

"Probably more. And, Girl, I have always believed, that a man who doesn't at least try to protect the honor of the woman he loves, shouldn't be called a man," he explained lovingly in my eyes.

"Okay. I'll stay here. Just hurry back."

"I promise," his words faded as he walked swiftly up the long walkway.

About three minutes later, while sitting in the car reading an issue of Ebony, my heart skipped a beat when I glanced up at the rear view mirror and noticed Mark pulling into the driveway with those same two cheerleaders, Sara James and Cathy Thomas. I grabbed my mouth, sliding down on the seat, as they drove past, pulling inside the gate.

The cheerleaders were giggling loud, as I could also hear

their music. But when he killed the motor, the music died as well as the giggling. Everything got quiet for a second, then I heard the doors slam shut, and steps on the walkway.

"So, are you girls really going to take care of all of us this evening?" Mark laughed.

"No. Mark," answered Cathy Thomas, giggling.

"No? What you mean, no? What did I drive all the way to Skokie for? Not to hear a damn no! That's for damn sure!" he said crossly.

"Look, Mark. What she means is...we only promised to make it with you and Tanner," Sara James tried to explain.

"Just myself and Tanner. I see? That will please Tanner no doubt, but what about the other guys in the house? They will want a piece of the action too," he said.

"The hell with the other guys! Let them go out and find their own action!" Cathy Thomas shouted.

"Are you raising your voice with me?" he yelled.

"No! I'm not raising my voice with you. I'm just letting you know that we are not going for no bull-shit like that!" Cathy Thomas shouted.

"Wait a minute, Sara James," Cathy Thomas hollered.

I scooted up on the seat just a tad to be able to peep at them. Cathy Thomas was pulling Sara James by the sweater, heading back toward Mark's silver Mercedes.

"We're getting the hell out of here! I'm not screwing around with a whole damn house of men! That wasn't the plan! I got a thing for Tanner! It's him or nothing," Cathy Thomas argued heatedly.

"Girls! Get your fine asses back here! Cause if you think I'm driving all the way back to Skokie now, you got another thought coming!" Mark stated, half-way laughing.

"Mark, could you tell Cathy that we are not going to be screwing around with the whole house, just you and Tanner."

"Okay. Whatever. Now get over here," he demanded.

After they headed inside, I grabbed my chest thinking about Cooper having a possible confrontation with Mark again. What could I do? He had asked me to stay in the car. And I had agreed. But that was before Mark showed up.

My heart raced and my mouth was open as my eyes followed their steps straight to the front door. When the storm door flapped, I grabbed my head. I couldn't sit still and wait, not knowing if Cooper and Mark would go at it again.

I pushed the door open with one foot on the driveway. Paused for a second, putting my foot back inside and closing the door. One thought told me that Mark would be too busy with Sara James and Cathy Thomas to confront Cooper. But an agonizing thought said no, being with the girls didn't stop the first fist fight yesterday.

I strutted up the walkway swiftly, looking back over my shoulders as I headed toward the big house. Why was I looking back? I didn't know. Maybe because I felt I was sneaking doing something I felt I shouldn't be doing, heading inside that whorehouse.

When I reached the front door, I looked at the doorbell, but right away figured I shouldn't ring it. Because I didn't want to be noticed. I just wanted to nose around to make sure Mark and Cooper wouldn't throw any punches. And after seeing everything was okay, head back to the car.

I looked at my watch and only ten minutes had passed since Cooper had left the car. Why did it seem much longer? I glanced around once, then twisted the gold-plated doorknob, and the door cracked open. I stepped into the huge foyer and couldn't hear voice one.

I tiptoed in, closing the door softly, looking to my left at the long staircase, then to my right at the door leading to the downstairs rehearsal room, and then straight ahead at the double doors into the spacious living room. Then one mind told me to head up the stairs, and when I reached the second level, heading down the long hallway, I heard voices coming up the stairs.

Quickly, I rushed into the second door on the left. And as the voices got closer, I thought, "Oh, no, not this room." But before I could finish my thought, someone turned the doorknob as I rushed into the closet, praying whoever it was wouldn't open the closet and find me.

"Get in here, Sara James. I don't have no time to waste," Mark uttered loudly.

"Oh! My God!" I thought to myself, grabbing my mouth.

I was stuck in the closet of Mark's bedroom, and he and those cheerleaders were getting ready to do who knows what. It served me right. Cause I should have listened to Cooper and stayed in the car. I felt my face and hand warm from agitation. I was stuck!

"I'm waiting here in the door for Cathy and Tanner," Sara James laughed.

"Get the hell over here, woman. Forget Tanner and Cathy Thomas. Who cares about them? They are holding up my action. So I say, let's start without them."

"Just a second, Mark. I'm going to make it worth the wait, Baby. You'll see," Sara James snickered.

"Look, I'm ready for you now. So close the damn door and start getting out of some of that shit you're wearing," he demanded.

"Wait a minute. I think I hear them. Oh, yeah, here comes Cathy now. But I don't see Tanner."

"Cathy, where is Tanner? We were waiting on you guys. What took you so long?" Sara James asked.

"I know. I was trying to wait for Tanner. He's down in the rehearsal room talking to Cooper Valentine," Cathy Thomas uttered, then I heard the door shut.

"You mean Cooper is downstairs?" Mark asked with a bitter tone.

"Yeah, I just saw him. He's down there gathering some things in a shopping bag," Cathy Thomas relayed.

"That's more like it! He's getting his shit! And he won't

have a reason under the sun to pay another visit," Mark chuckled.

"So he's really out of the group for real?" Cathy Thomas asked.

"Yes! All the way out! He's out on his ear!" Mark roared bitterly.

"That's too bad. Cooper's voice is wow!" Cathy Thomas uttered strongly.

"Yes! His voice may be hot! But he just screwed up the biggest opportunity that has ever come his way! Cause we're climbing up the charts," he paused.

"Yeah, I think so. Cause everybody I know is playing your records," Cathy Thomas said.

"Pass me those smokes off the dresser. This band is going places. Our future looks very bright!" he exclaimed excitedly.

"Here you are," said Sara James.

"Thanks, Girl. You got a light?" he asked.

"Yeah. Wait up. I think I have some matches in my purse," Sara James uttered in a cheery voice.

"Yeah. Girls. Mr. Cool threw it all away for a piece of ass! Go figure! What a damn waste. The son-of-a-bitch could sing like crazy!" he paused.

"Mark. I'm sorry. But I guess I don't have any matches," Sara James said.

"You mean as bad as I want a smoke there's no matches up in here. Bull-shit. Well, piss on it! I need to quit smoking anyway," he laughed.

"Don't we all," Sara James replied.

"Anyway, like I was saying, Cooper threw all his shit away over some bitch. I damn sure would like to see this chick that he's throwing everything away for! I wonder if she's all that. Hell, I remember when he first signed up with the band, she was with him. But we were so into signing him up at the time. Shit! I wouldn't even recognize her if she walked into this room right now."

My heart skipped a beat; if only he knew I was already in his

room!

"Yes. Mark," replied Sara James.

"Yes. Mark, what?" he asked.

"Yes. She's all that," she answered.

"Oh, yeah," he replied.

"Yes. We go to the same university as Maryann and Cooper. Her name is Maryann Brooks. We don't really know her personally, but we have exchanged hello's here and there. And Cooper always picks her up after classes," Sara James explained.

"So this chick isn't half bad? A real looker, I take it?"

"Hell yes. The entire campus thinks so. Don't they Sara James? They have all voted her in to be the campus queen," Cathy Thomas stated.

That bit of information about the campus queen was news to me. What an honor to find out in such a cheap way.

"Do you think this Maryann would fool around on Mr. Cool?" Mark asked, laughing.

"I would like to hit that and see what Cooper is going crazy over," he laughed.

"Don't ask us if she fools around. How in the hell are we supposed to know what Maryann Brooks does? And who cares?" Sara James shouted crossly.

"I do! I know the little princess is probably putting out! I was just wondering would she like to spread it around," he chuckled.

"Mark, when are you ever going to be satisfied with one woman? What are you trying to do, break a record by screwing every woman on the streets?" Cathy Thomas asked in a huffy voice.

He laughed, "Maybe you're on to something Cathy Thomas. But what's it to you" he laughed.

I was just wondering. It's nothing to me. It may be something to Sara James, she's the one who's getting ready to hop in bed with you," Cathy Thomas snapped.

"And if you want to start throwing insults. Let's start by saying, you two are the only two females I know who are best

buddies and you're both referred to by your entire names," he laughed.

"Whatever, Mark. What's it to you?" Cathy Thomas snickered.

There was a bit of silence, then Cathy Thomas and Sara James were giggling.

"What are you two giggling about? I wish one of you knew this Brooks chick a little better. Cause I really would like to know if she'll fool around on Cooper."

"Who cares!" Sara James and Cathy Thomas shouted.

"Do I detect a bit of jealousy from you two? Don't be. I'm sure Miss Brooks doesn't have anything any hotter than you two," he paused. "So why not drop that dress, Sara James and let's do a little fooling around of our own," Mark suggested and paused as someone stepped into the room, closing the door loudly.

"Man! What took your ass so long? These girls wouldn't pull off a stitch without you," Mark explained loudly.

"Is that right? How cool," he laughed. "I was downstairs showing Cooper where some of his things were."

"Damn, man! Is that chump still here?" asked Mark.

"Yeah!...He's still here, and probably will be for awhile. He can't seem to locate his silver belt and leopard vest. Stuart is down there helping him now," Tanner uttered.

I was pleased to hear Cooper was still inside and hadn't made it back to the car to find a missing fiance.

"Girls. What are you waiting for? I'm here! And I'm ready! Mark is here, and he's ready. We are all here and ready. So let's get busy," Tanner suggested in an anxious tone.

"I'm ready, Tanner. I have been ready for you for a long time. So whatever you want, you got," Cathy Thomas giggled.

"Now, that's what I want to hear," Tanner laughed out loud.

"You hear me Tanner? Anything. Cause you are too fine," Cathy Thomas assured him.

"Okay. Babe! What I would really love more than anything

is to see you naked. Strip down to those black high heels and I'll be very happy for starters."

Suddenly, I heard the mattress squeak, and a lot of movement on the bed, which was probably Mark and Sara James having sex. And by now my face was covered with tears, as a disgusted feeling ran through my stomach for indirectly invading their privacy.

"Tanner is this bare enough for you?" Cathy Thomas asked.

"Holy shit! Girl! Look at you! Girl, I didn't know you had all of that under that dress," he said excitedly.

"Tanner, what are you doing?"

"I'm looking for a nickel."

"I'm standing here with my clothes off and you're looking through your pockets for a nickel? What on earth for?"

"I want to measure your nipples," he paused.

"Maybe a quarter would be more like it," he paused again.

"What size are you anyway, a 36 double "D" or what? You have the largest, roundest, sexiest set of boobs I have ever seen in all my 22 years."

"You see, Babe. I'm one of those dudes who get off on big breasted dames like you, Girl," he laughed.

"Tanner. You're just saying that to make me feel good," she giggled.

"No way Babe. I'm not trying to stroke your ego. I'm just telling you the plain fact. Some guys like fine legs, some like a nice ass. But give me big boobs any day."

"Tanner, you are some kink. But I'm mad about you anyway."

"Take a look at this, Babe. Now this is what you're going to be mad about," he stated breathless.

"I bet you are right. Is all that yours? Jesus. Help me!" she said breathless.

"You see it don't you?" he laughed.

"I sure do. And I'm good and ready for it," she paused.

"But where are we going to make it at? Mark and Sara

James have taken over the entire bed," Cathy Thomas asked.

"Come here, Girl. This damn carpet will do just fine."

After a moment, I heard rough movement on the floor.

"Oh, Tanner! I love it so much. I love you, Tanner. Don't stop! Please don't stop," Cathy Thomas begged.

Their sex voices became obscene and disgusting. I closed my eyes, not that I could see anything in that dark, crowded closet, but I still closed them tight and covered my ears.

About fifteen to twenty minutes later, all four of them had left the room. And suddenly everything seemed extremely quiet as I peeked my head out of the closet, then out of the room, finding the hallway quiet and empty. And with my heart racing fast, I rushed down the stairs and out the front door, not slowing down until I reached the middle of the walkway.

I started wondering how I would explain my whereabouts to Cooper, who was surely back at the car by now, an half hour later! But to my surprise and relief, he wasn't in the car. I jerked the door open quickly, flopping inside, breathless. And as I tried to calm down, thinking I had sneaked in there and sneaked back before Cooper could be the wiser, my heart raced again at the possibility of him returning to the car, seeing I wasn't there, and returning back inside.

I grabbed my face and told myself to calm down. That Cooper probably had not been to the car, since there were no bags on the back seat.

No more than three minutes after I hopped back into the car, I glanced up the walkway and noticed Cooper strolling quickly toward the car, smiling and shaking his head, carrying two large shopping bags in his hands. And when he reached the car, he swiftly stepped around to the trunk and put both bags in there.

"I'm sorry it took so long, Baby," he said, closing the trunk.

He jumped in, closed the door and started the engine, still smiling.

"Maryann. I'm smiling because I was in there all this time

looking for my silver belt," he said, backing out of the driveway.

"Why is that something to laugh about?"

"Well. It's not. But in this case, it is. Because, what happened is, when I first started gathering my things, I put the silver belt in one of the bags. But after getting all my things, somehow it had slipped my mind or I forgot, or didn't really pay any attention to putting it in the bag. He glanced over at me and back to the road. "Well, needless to say, I pulled everything out of both bags and found it at the bottom of one," he grinned.

"And I would like for you to know, Maryann, that I didn't have any words with Mark," he glanced at me and backed to the road.

"I saw him headed upstairs as I was headed out of the door, he glanced over his shoulder and kept walking," he reached over and touched my cheek.

I was being especially quiet, halfway still shook up over my encounter in Mark's room.

"Maryann. Girl, you're being mighty quiet. I guess you're sore cause I had you waiting out in the car all that time," he tickled my chin. "I'm sorry about that Baby."

"It's not that, Cooper. I'm not sore at you. I'm sore at myself," I mumbled.

"Sore with yourself for what?"

"Well. I sort of did what you asked me not to," I mumbled sadly again.

"What's that, Maryann?" he glanced over quickly and back to the road. "I guess you came inside looking for me?" he asked.

I nodded, looking straight through the windshield in great thought, thinking how I was stuck in that closet, and how I dared to tell Cooper that part. I would tell him, but leave out the obscene part.

He touched my shoulder. "Don't worry about that. I can understand how you wanted to see what was holding me up."

I came inside looking for you after Mark and those

cheerleaders headed inside. I was afraid you two would fuss again. So I sneaked in just to see if everything was okay, and ended up getting stuck in one of the bedroom closets."

"Maryann. What are you talking about?" he asked.

"I was sneaking and didn't want you or anyone else to see me inside, so when I heard voices coming up the stairs, I ducked into one of the bedrooms and hid in the closet. And while I was in the closet, someone stepped into the room for a few minutes and I had to wait in the closet until they left the room," I sniffled.

"Girl. Why are you crying? You know I don't like to see you cry. And what are you crying for anyway? It wasn't as bad as all of that? Was it?" he tickled my stomach. "Did you think the big bad goblin was going to get you while you were hid away in that dark closet?" he teased.

I laughed in a shaky voice, "Don't tease me. That was an awful fix I was in."

Suddenly, while driving along the long stretch of highway from "Middle Ground's" big house, I became somewhat sleepy, glanced at the car clock and it was straight up 7:00 o'clock, as I laid my head over on Cooper's shoulder and he put his right arm around me. And while lying on his shoulder, I glanced up at the rear view mirror and spotted Mark driving his silver Mercedes right behind us with Sara James and Cathy Thomas pointing at Cooper's car.

I swallowed hard, biting down on my bottom lip. I couldn't imagine what they were pointing for, until one thought, said maybe me. And then I thought maybe Mark wanted another confrontation with Cooper. I didn't know what they were up to, but my nerves were on edge. Maybe they were trying to let me know they knew I had spied on them in Mark's closet. But no way could they have known I was hiding in there.

The music was blasting and Cooper was singing along to Michael Jackson's Billie Jean song, not paying any attention to the fact that Mark and the cheerleaders were behind us, pointing and grinning.

As Mark swung the car to the left lane, coming up alongside of us, I slid down on the seat, as my long curls covered my face. Then I heard Sara James holler, "Maryann. We chose you for the campus queen! You'll find out next Monday."

"Where in the hell is she?" Mark asked.

"There she is scooted down on the seat," Sara James replied.

"What in the world is Mark up to now? I thought he got enough yesterday!" Cooper screamed, slamming a fist against the steering wheel.

"Pull over, Man! Pull over!" Cooper yelled angrily, slowing down, pulling over to the side.

I glanced up just in time to see Mark finger Cooper, stepping on the gas.

"That piece of slum! I'll show him what I think of his silly road game," Cooper yelled bitterly, throwing the car in gear, doing two fishtails, scotching the wheels down the highway toward Mark's car.

"Cooper. No! Let them go! Forget Mark Franklin. Plus, you're scaring me. I'm afraid of fast driving," I pleaded, staring at him, squeezing my hands together.

"Hold on. Baby. Don't worry, I know what I'm doing. You know I would never hurt you. Trust me. I can handle this car like the back of my hand! And I'm getting ready to show that chump who's in control! I'm gonna leave his butt and his prize car in the dust."

I grabbed my face as I watched the speedometer zig-zag on 85. By now we were right alongside of Mark's car.

"You want to race, you bastard? I'll give you a race, one that's going to leave you in the dust!" Cooper hollered out the window angrily.

"Oh! Yeah! We'll see about that!" Mark hollered back.

"Hold on, Maryann, I'm getting ready to smoke his ass," he laughed as his foot floored the gas pedal.

I looked at the speedometer and the needle was steady on 95,

as Mark's car was still right alongside of us. Sara James had her head out the window laughing and cheering Mark on. It was quite apparent that she wasn't afraid of fast driving. But I was too afraid to speak.

"Mark! Faster! Faster! He's gaining!" Sara James screamed.

My eyes were glued to the highway, hoping no cars would come along and smash into one of us.

Mark started blowing his horn, slowly inching ahead of us, when Cooper twisted his foot on the accelerator, zig-zagging the needle at 120. "No you won't!" he hollered.

And just like a flash of light, Cooper flew by Mark's Mercedes like it was standing still. And just like a quick shadow, Cooper had left Mark's car in the smoke, then started slowing down, turning off that back highway, but didn't see Mark's car anywhere in sight.

When we finally pulled into my driveway, he dropped his head on the steering wheel for a second, then looked at me, who was taking deep breaths, and smiled.

"Maryann. Did I smoke him or what?" he grinned.

"You smoked him alright," I grinned. "But you also smoked me," I laughed. "I was scared out of my wits." I threw my arms around him. "But I'm glad we did show him."

"You darn sure we showed him, Girl. It takes more than that silver Mercedes to beat my Porsche."

The next morning, during my Thursday Math class, which was only an hour session, I was no longer shaken over the closet incident and the road race. My mind was clear and focused toward my quiz the instructor was getting prepared to give the class.

I glanced up at the clock upon the instructor's desk, and it was a quarter past 9:00 a.m. Around 10:30, Cooper would be finished with his Bio-Chemistry class, and we would have lunch at Bennigans then head to work. I was daydreaming about how wonderful it was that we attended the same university and now would

be working together again, at the same medical center, after he was called and rehired at his old part-time job yesterday.

When the bell rang for the next class, I was still sitting at my desk finishing up my quiz when a girl touched my shoulder. I looked up into Sara James' and Cathy Thomas' smiling faces.

"Hi, Maryann. That was really wild yesterday how we were all drag racing," Sara James giggled.

"Hi, Sara James. Hi, Cathy Thomas," I spoke.

"So you know our names?" asked Cathy Thomas.

"Yes. Is that such a surprise? You'all know mine."

"Well, yes. Because your name was on the list as one of the candidates for the campus queen. As if that wasn't enough, being Cooper Valentine's girl gets your name out there,"Cathy Thomas stated. "But how do you happen to know ours?" she asked.

I shook my head, stacking my quiz papers. "That's an easy one. I'll ask you'all. Do you think being two of the school's famous, most popular cheerleaders wouldn't do it?"

They giggled, both wearing disgustingly short, tight skirts. I loved mini-skirts. But theirs were more like a second skirt.

"I guess that would do it," giggled Sara James, exchanging looks with Cathy Thomas.

"I guess we are pretty popular," giggled Cathy Thomas, touching my arm as I rose from my seat, heading to turn in my test papers.

I stopped in my tracks, glancing back, "Yes."

They walked up to face me, "We just wanted to tell you, that Mark Franklin, the bass...."

I cut Sara James off. "I know who he is. What about him," I snapped, not pleased to be cornered by the two of them, especially mentioning Mark Franklin's name.

They exchanged looks, as if they were debating on whether they should say what they were trying to say.

"I glanced at my watch. "I'm waiting," I replied, tapping my fingers on my textbooks.

They didn't respond, so I stepped up to the instructor's desk, dropped off my lesson and headed out of the classroom. I glanced around and the two of them were right there. So I stopped against the wall and held my textbooks tight against my chest, shaking my head.

"So what is this? Why are you girls following me? I'm sorry, but I'm kind of in a rush here," I spoke with an irritated voice.

"Well, it's just that Mark Franklin has the hots for you and don't even know who you are. He wanted us to ask you if you fool around," Sara James asked as they both snickered, as if they found that very amusing.

"That's what yesterday was all about," Cathy Thomas said.

I was standing there nodding up and down, waiting to see what they were talking about.

"He wasn't trying to race with you guys at first. It's just that while he was headed to take us home, he spotted you'all and he was driving alongside to try to get a glimpse of you," Cathy Thomas giggled.

"To get a glimpse of me? Why?" I asked.

"Seriously, Maryann. Haven't you heard anything we just said? He has it bad for you, Girl. He said if you get together and talk to him, he might be persuaded to break the clause that broke Cooper's contract. He said you know the number to his house."

Before I could answer them, and not that their question deserved an answer, but Cooper walked up, smiling, taking my textbooks.

"Are you ready to grab some grub before we head to work?" he asked, leaning down to kiss the side of my face.

"Sure, I'm ready," I smiled at him, putting my arm around his waist as we headed down the hall.

"Cooper! We love your car! It's really cool!" Hollered Cathy Thomas as we walked slowly down the hall.

He glanced over his shoulder and waved at them. "Thanks girls," and looked at me. "Were those a couple of your friends? I

was pretty rude. I didn't even think to speak."

"I shook my head, frowning. "Cooper. No. That's Sara James and Cathy Thomas. I thought you knew them. They are those two cheerleaders that everybody refers to by their whole name, plus you should have recognized them from showing up at the house two days ago with Mark," I paused up in his eyes as we walked along. "And they were in the car with him yesterday while we were racing, remember?"

"Okay, I think I do. But I have never known their names," he grabbed my hand as we headed through the double doors. "And since they are hanging out with trash like Mark, I don't even care to know."

That night in bed I kept tossing and turning, thinking about Mark Franklin's proposal. He had offered me an opportunity to help get Cooper signed back with the group. I glanced at the clock on the nightstand and it was straight up 11:00 o'clock, but something told me, Mark would still be up and about if I decided to call.

A few minutes later, I glanced at the clock again, threw the covers back, jumping out of bed, sitting on the edge next to the nightstand. I grabbed my face, staring at the phone, having a serious doubt in my head: Should I call? Shouldn't I call? What if my calling could make a difference? I had to try I thought, grabbing the phone from the nightstand to hold in my lap.

My fingers trembled as I dialed the number to the big house. A number Cooper had dialed from my house many times before.

"Hello," a man answered.

"Hello. May I speak to Mark?"

"Hold up."

"Talk to me," Mark answered.

"Hello. Is this Mark?"

"The one and only. And who may I be talking to?" he said in a low sensuous voice, probably thinking I was one of his many female callers.

"This is Maryann. I'm Cooper's fiance."

He became very quiet, as I waited for him to reply, and he was not responding.

"I'm calling because I got your message about maybe signing Cooper back up," I said eagerly.

"Yes. That's correct. I was thinking about," he paused. "If I could get a little bit of feed back from you on his feelings about the whole situation. Because the attitude he's displaying is saying, the hell with the group. I'm out! And the hell with getting back in. You see, Maryann, that's why I wanted to talk to you, so we could find out the real story behind how Cooper feels about this breakup," he coughed.

"These damn cigarettes are no good for me. This is one habit I got to break. Do you smoke, Maryann?" he asked.

"No," I replied.

"Good deal. Because these damn cancer sticks are not worth the time or the money. But anyway, before we speak any further, is Cooper aware of this call?" he asked, talking in a much softer, polite voice than he had displayed while I hid in the closet.

"No. Cooper doesn't know I'm calling you," I replied.

"Good. Because I don't need anymore trouble out of him. We haven't been able to hold a conversation without our tempers flaring, since all this went down," he explained politely.

"Yes. I know. I was home when you two got into that punching match in my front yard," I said in a stiff voice.

"Case in point," he quickly uttered.

"Don't worry. I won't mention this conversation to him. I just want you to sign him back with the band."

"That's a possibility. But I need to meet with you to further this discussion," he relayed, and paused.

"What you mean discuss further? I can tell you right now that he's miserable without the group. So why do you need to talk to me in person?" I asked nervously, knowing I didn't want to have a person to person meeting with him. Because from what I had heard, he was like a savage with women.

"I know. But this is business. A phone discussion won't do it. Now, it's left up to you. But if you want me to sign Cooper back up, it's going to take a one-on-one business discussion between you and I," he said politely.

"Okay," I said, biting down on my bottom lip.

"Okay," he paused. "Name the place and time. And the sooner we get together and discuss this, the better," he said.

"Come by my house tomorrow around 1:00 p.m. I don't have to work and I only have one class. But it's over by 11:30 a.m. So my house around 1:00 should be okay."

"So, your house is the one across from Cooper's parents where our little scene took place two days ago?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Okay. 1:00 it is. Now, I don't have to worry about Cooper showing up do I?" he asked.

"No, it will be okay. I'll be the only one home tomorrow."

"Okay, Miss Maryann. I'll see you at 1:00, and we'll see about getting Cooper back with the band."

The next morning when I got home from class, I knew I couldn't go through with meeting with Mark. In the pit of my stomach it didn't seem right. I felt I was not loyal toward Cooper and I didn't feel that I could trust Mark. And when he arrived at my house right on time, I chose not to answer the door. And after ringing the doorbell for five or six times and knocking loudly for six or seven times, I heard his car doors slam and he took off.

Five minutes later, the phone rang. I stared at the phone for a couple seconds, knowing he had probably gotten the number from information. So, nervously, I grabbed the receiver to my ear.

"Hello."

"Why didn't you answer the door?" he asked calmly.

"I decided against meeting with you," I mumbled in a low voice.

"Speak up. I can't hear you. It's pretty noisy where I am. Now what did you say?" he asked.

"I said, I can't meet with you," I said louder.

"And why is that? I thought we had a deal," he asked loudly but didn't sound upset.

"I know, Mark. But after giving it some thought, I just didn't think it was the right thing to do. I felt as if I was going behind Cooper's back," I explained.

"Okay. But if you felt that way, why didn't you give me a call instead of having me drive all the way over by you?"

"I did try to reach you, but whoever answered the phone said you had left the house. And I didn't leave a message."

"I see," he mumbled.

"I'm sorry, Mark. But I never should have called you and gotten in the middle of this in the first place. Cooper is his own man, and he takes care of his own business," I paused.

"And seriously, Mark. I don't think this would sit too well with him, me stepping in trying to get you guys to sign him back up," I explained nervously, now feeling a tinge of disloyalty toward Cooper by even holding a phone conversation with Mark.

"Is that right," he uttered with a cold edge.

"Yes. That's right. Because the way I see it, if you want to sign Cooper back, you will. And if you don't, you won't. And I really don't think anything I say is going to make any difference," I paused.

I could hear Mark talking to someone in the background as he was trying to keep me from hearing by placing his hand over the receiver.

"Look! Man! You have been standing behind me too damn long! Can't you see I'm trying to have a private conversation! This phone is taken! Go look for one that isn't," he yelled.

"Hello, Maryann. Are you still there?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm here," I replied, wanting to hang up.

"Sorry about that. But some nasty bum kept standing behind me tapping on my shoulders for the phone. But anyway, as you were saying?" he asked.

"Well, I was just saying that last night I told you how miserable Cooper was over the split up. And there's nothing more I can tell you. That is why I get the feeling you're up to something else."

"Something else, like what?" he snapped, taking a long pause.

"Girl. You are not who I thought you were. I thought you loved your man enough to do whatever it took to help him out."

"I will do whatever I can to help. But not what I think you are asking. Never," I said in a huffy voice.

"And what am I asking?"

"You're asking me to meet with you. And that part just doesn't fit."

"So I guess you are pretty clever, Maryann."

"So you're saying I was right and you were up to no good about wanting to meet with me?" I asked.

"Okay. All the bull aside. I'll sign Cooper back up tomorrow," he paused.

My heart started pounding. Was he on the up and up? He was going to sign Cooper back just like that, from the kindness of his heart. The kind of kindness that I didn't think he had. But before I could get too excited, he blurted out loudly, "If you'll give me a piece of action today. What you say?" he was breathing heavy.

I was speechless and stunned at his boldness as I held the receiver to my ear.

"I give you my word. He'll be back on the payroll. And all you have to do is give me some of that you're giving Cooper," he paused.

"I can swing over there, and be at your door in ten minutes or less. I'm not that far from your house right now. I'm calling from a pay phone at McDonalds. And listen. You won't have to pull off a thing. You hear me? Nothing. I'll work my way around your clothes. No foreplay. Just a straight fuck," he breathed.

My mouth fell open as I grabbed my stomach with my left hand, trying to keep my composure, not wanting him to know that

his disgusting manners made me want to puke.

"Cooper was right about you guys. You are all obsessed with getting every girl you can in bed! Here you are asking me to have sex with you and you don't even know me," I screamed through the receiver angrily.

"What does not knowing you got to do with any damn thing! I'm trying to give you an opportunity to help the stubborn jerk you're hitched with!"

"Well, Mark. You can forget your idea. I'm not about to go to bed with you! And what really gets me, is the fact that you had the gall to even suggest it! And even greater gall to think I would," I paused.

"And if nothing else, you know I'm engaged to Cooper! And you want me to believe you'll help him by signing him back with the group? When you don't even respect him. Because if you did, you wouldn't be trying to have sex with his fiance," I exclaimed crossly.

"Wait! A minute. Hold up, Maryann. Can I say something here?" he asked.

"No. You can't. Cause there's nothing I want to hear from you, Mark."

"Woman, wait a minute!"

"No. You wait a minute! And don't call me woman. I'm not your woman."

"I know that Maryann. But you got me all wrong. Really I'm trying to help Cooper out here! So before you lose your head and get all bent out of shape, seriously, I think you need to think about this thing," he exclaimed desperately, as if my rejection was physically hurting him.

"Look Mark! I have thought about it, and that's why I can say what I'm saying. Because the way I see it, this is just another ploy to hurt Cooper."

"No! You got it wrong, Maryann. You just don't want to get up off that ass for nobody but Cooper."

"Whatever, Mark. But I'm about to hang up now."

Chapter Four

Shortly after the break up with the band, Cooper sub-leased his high rise penthouse apartment and moved back across the street from me with his parents. It was great being neighbors again, but not at the expense of his happiness. Cause even though he put up a good front, it was still pretty clear that he wasn't comfortable about moving back home. But I had never seen his Mom and Dad in better spirits. They were very happy to have their son, who was their only child, back home to fuss over.

So it was final, we had discussed it, and he had made up his mind to forget all the members of "Middle Ground" and leave his musical career in the past and try to focus on being the best doctor he could.

And at times he actually seemed content having his old job back at the Medical Center, and started devoting most of his spare time to his medical studies, but on most occasions when we were alone spending quiet time, and I looked deep into his eyes I could see him staring off into space with such sadness in his eyes. And even though he laughed and smiled and talked a great deal about how

much he enjoyed pre-med, and his pathophysiology and hematology classes, I still couldn't shake this nagging feeling that his joy wasn't complete. Because music was also his joy. That void was there. I knew he needed his musical career as a part of his life.

I could sense his unhappiness being away from the band. But he never once said that he missed the group, or that he wanted to start another band. But he wasn't happy because I could tell. And because of his being down hearted, I couldn't seem to lift my spirits.

A few local bands from River Grove and Schaumburg tried to grab him up, but he wasn't interested. He wouldn't even audition or go around other bands. And that behavior alone, regardless of his denials of being miserable, made it quite apparent that he was too heartbroken and too let down with his old group to let himself get wrapped up with another. And I'm sure somewhere in the back of his crushed heart, he probably felt that hooking up with another less established group would mean failure. But I kept telling him that he hadn't failed at anything, and that he should sue "Middle Ground." But he wouldn't hear of it. He was determined to try and convince me that he was just fine being an ex-member. But his denial was wearing heavy, causing him to clam up and keep a lot of emotions to himself. He had been at the top and couldn't face settling for less. But all and all, he was coping pretty well, and our plans hadn't changed, we were still getting married come next spring, March 28, on my birthday, then one Friday night, while relaxing in his parent's basement, eating popcorn and drinking ginger ale, we were watching MTV and it caught our attention while sitting on the couch kissing and feeding each other popcorn when we heard that the newly featured video was by "Middle Ground" of Chicago, Illinois.

Our eyes were glued to the TV set, while we held hands. Then, wouldn't you know, they had done exactly what they told Cooper they would do. They had replaced him with a dead ringer look-alike.

We looked at each other and grinned because this new vocalist was lip-syncing one of Cooper's songs.

After the video was shown, the host welcomed Tanner Smith, Mark Franklin, Stuart and Freddie Larson and there was a standing ovation when the host introduced the vocalist as Cooper Valentine. I grabbed my mouth and looked at Cooper, and his already crushed eyes sank deep into his face as if they would burst. And a sudden fear dashed through my stomach as I had never witnessed such an astounding look of defeat and anguish in his eyes. Before I could bring myself to say anything, he jumped right up from the couch and tore up the basement steps, and quickly ripping out of the front door. I ran after him, but he jumped in his car and pulled off at full speed before I could make it out of the front door and stop him.

From the loud flap of the storm door and my bellowing down the street for him, his Mom and Dad rushed into the living room to find me on my knees at the front door crying. I glanced around at them, holding my face as I was weeping uncontrollably, unable to speak. The door was wide open and the cold, blowing snowy winds had filled the large room.

Dr. Valentine paced slowly across the room toward the open door, wearing a long, brown robe, tying his belt with a disturbed look on his face as he quickly shut the door and whistled.

"Man, it's cold out there. Rosemary help that child up. I don't know what's going on, but she's sitting here on the floor crying with this door stretched wide open. She's going to catch her death. And where is Cooper anyway?"

"I think that's who she was calling for," replied Mrs. Valentine, helping me over to the sofa and patting my back.

"What? You mean that boy isn't here?" grumbled Dr. Valentine.

"That's right, Allen. Look around. Do you see him? My God old man, can't you see that's what she's crying about? Something happened and he took off," explained Mrs. Valentine with an agitated tone, taking a seat beside me.

"I see," he coughed. "Don't bite my head off," he coughed again. "So you're saying they had a little fight and he rushed out of

here?" he coughed between words.

"I guess, Allen. I don't know any more than you do. But as soon as Maryann calms down she'll tell us what happened."

I blew my nose with a Kleenex Mrs. Valentine handed me, but I couldn't stop sniffling.

"I couldn't stop him! I couldn't!" I sniffled between words. "And Mrs. Valentine," I looked at her. "His eyes," I pointed to both of my eyes. "His eyes."

Dr. Valentine took a seat on the other side of me and patted my shoulder, exchanging confused looks with Mrs. Valentine.

"What is she talking about - his eyes, what?" he asked.

"Maryann. Dear. Tell us what happened? Did the two of you have a fight? What's wrong? Try to calm down and tell us what happened," Mrs. Valentine stressed anxiously.

I was shaking my head, shivering with fear and in a distraught state of mind. "I can't calm down. I can't! I can't! Cooper is gone! He's gone! I couldn't stop him," I stressed sadly, sniffling between words.

"Maryann. You know that boy will be back. He's just blowing off a little steam. Every couple has a little spat sometimes. Come on now and listen to Rosemary and pull yourself together," Dr. Valentine mumbled, trying to comfort me.

"But you guys didn't see him," I looked around at Dr. Valentine. "His eyes! Oh! God! My Cooper is gone! I'm never going to see my Cooper again! I can't live without my Cooper." I grabbed my face and ran over to the window, dropping down to my knees, staring out into the streets.

Mrs. Valentine rushed to my side, helping me up again, helping me back across the room.

"Come on, Maryann. Don't do this, child. You are going to make yourself sick crying like this."

"But I can't live without Cooper."

"Sweetheart, you won't have to live without him. He'll be back home soon. He loves you, Maryann. I'm sure he's not going

to let a little disagreement come between you two. And you know better than that yourself, dear," she uttered caringly, helping me back into my seat, taking a seat beside me.

"I kept shaking my head and bumping my knees together, "But his eyes!"

"Maryann," Mrs. Valentine patted my eyes with a Kleenex. "Dear, what do you mean by that? Did something happen to his eyes?"

"Yes! His eyes were so crushed; they were crushed. He is so hurt. And it's not because we had a fight. We would never fight. Never. It's because of those low-down, dirty scoundrels that he used to be in the group with!"

"What happened? Is that where he took off to?" asked Dr. Valentine.

I shook my head. "No, I don't think so. I really don't know where he went," I blew my nose and spoke in a calmer voice as some of the fear subsided a bit.

"We were watching MTV and 'Middle Ground's' new video was shown, then Tanner and the rest of the group were introduced along with Cooper's replacement," I paused to catch my breath.

"Well, dear, that shouldn't have shocked Cooper. He already knew they had found another singer to replace him," replied Dr. Valentine.

"But it did shock him, because they didn't just replace him, they gave this new man Cooper's name. And, Mrs. Valentine," I looked at her then turned to Dr. Valentine, "Dr. Valentine, I'm so afraid for Cooper's state of mind. I have never seen such turmoil in his eyes."

Shortly after I explained things to them, they seemed a bit shaken and somewhat disturbed but didn't seem too concerned about his whereabouts. Mrs. Valentine offered me the guest room, but they couldn't get me to leave the living room, and ended up giving me a quilt and a pillow for the sofa. And about an hour after they turned in, I laid there on the sofa, fully dressed with the quilt thrown over

me, and every time I closed my eyes, I could see his beautiful, charming face and just like a quick chill, that very destroyed look in his eyes would jerk me back awake.

He didn't come back home that night, and the next morning I woke up trembling with anxiety on their living room sofa. I had waited there all night for him, jumping up at the sound of every car passing down the street. And when I finally showed up for work an hour late and he hadn't shown up, and didn't show up at all that day, something in the pit of my stomach made me nauseated with fright.

All day at work I just couldn't concentrate, unable to shake the nagging thought in the back of my mind - that something major was wrong. Cooper hadn't shown up or called in. It wasn't like him not to call in, and it wasn't like him not to call me - keeping me worried. Plus that very torn look in his eyes right before he ripped out of the basement kept dancing in my head. I had never seen such hurt in his eyes. And I had never seen him more devastated and torn over anything. He had taken the break up pretty well, but seeing his replacement took the toll. And it was that sad, painful look in his eyes that kept worrying me.

When I left the clinic, I drove straight home, stopping at his parents' house first to see if he had gotten home, trying to think positive thoughts and stay calm, while my heart was breaking bit by bit wondering where he was. But I kept telling myself to stay calm, reminding myself that his parents didn't seem too concerned. They felt he would be okay - and I had to try and think the same. But when I pulled into the driveway, I could tell no one was home before I even turned off the motor. The shades were down and all the cars were gone. But still I had to check anyway. Nervous and worried, I stepped out of my car and slowly made my way up the walkway, stopping for only a second to pet "Sammie," Cooper's big, friendly white collie, who ran from around back to greet me the moment I slammed the car door. And just as I stepped upon their porch and knocked once, I heard someone call my name. I looked around and it was Paul sticking his head out of the front door - across the road

at our house.

"Maryann, Mama said they're not home," he hollered and stuck his head back inside.

I merely nodded "yes," and turned slowly and walked across their porch and down the steps, in wonderment of what was going on and where could he be? And just as I stretched open the car door to get inside and drive over to the house, I looked up and saw Mama hurrying out of the front door in a state of panic with something white in her hand. And I could see that she was walking very quickly to where I was, as I stood there motionless next to the open car door. Then, immediately, my heart pounded with anxiety when I noticed her take the white item that she was carrying and wiped her eyes.

I was motionless and I couldn't move, but the closer she got, the more I could detect sadness from her face, plus I could see that she was crying.

When Mama made it across the road to the Valentine's front yard, I wanted to ask her what was wrong. But as I stared at my mother's face and in her eyes, I couldn't bring myself to say a word. And when she shook her head and said Cooper's name, a cold chill ripped through me and suddenly shooting pains started pinching my insides - as the clean, fresh evening air had suddenly become thick with humidity and I grabbed my ears and shook my head. Seconds later, I screamed.

"No!" And the last thing I heard my mother say was my name. Because as quick as a blink of an eye, I had thrown my car keys on the driveway and started running.

I ran across the road screaming and crying, "No! No!" - heading toward our backyard. I could barely breathe and I could barely see for the tears in my eyes. But I knew I had to get away from my mother and the news she had for me. That deeply sad look in her eyes said it all. Something had happened! Something that I didn't want to hear, and I knew it was about my Cooper. And as I ran as fast as I could, suddenly I found myself face down on the

backyard. I had lost one shoe and my coat wasn't buttoned. But the hard cold ground didn't bother me - neither did the wet snow that had just begun to fall.

I laid there only seconds crying before Mama, Dad and Paul gathered me up from the yard. Dad swept me up in his arms and carried me inside. We entered the house through the back door and I tore out of Dad's arms.

"Put me down! Leave me alone! Just leave me alone! Just let me sit here at this table in peace! And please don't tell me anything!" I pleaded in tears.

The three of them stood against the sink exchanging looks - as I sat there at the kitchen table all dirty and damp from the fall in the yard. My muddy fingers and hands trembled as my left arm rested on the white lace table cloth.

Dad dropped his head and stepped out of the kitchen, stepping right back in - saying to Mama, "We got to get going, Rose."

He and Mama stepped near me, as Mama handed me a damp hand towel.

"Here you are Sweetheart. Maryann, we are so sorry about Cooper," Mama blurted out quickly.

I held up both hands as my heart skipped a beat, then started racing with anxiety.

"I said don't tell me any bad news. Please! Please! Don't! My heart can't take it!" I grabbed my face and cried uncontrollably.

Mama rubbed my shoulder as she spoke in a deeply saddened voice.

"Sweetheart, I understand how you feel, but right now, what you need to hear is how much Cooper needs to see you."

I flew right out of my seat, wiping my face and hands with the damp towel.

"What you mean he needs to see me? Where is he? Is he okay?" I asked anxiously - afraid of the answer.

"No, Sweetheart, he isn't okay. He was involved in a

collision. He's in intensive care at Northwestern Hospital.

For some reason, I don't even remember the drive to the hospital. And I don't even remember walking into the building. All I remember is seeing Cooper's handsome face with not a single scratch on it, and the many wires hooked up to him. But his eyes were closed and he didn't even know I was there.

Mama and Dad waited in the waiting room with me all night, and by the break of day, someone tapped my shoulder. It was his parents standing over me crying. I jumped straight up from the lounge chair.

"Our Cooper didn't make it," cried Mrs. Valentine - handing me a white envelope.

"He told us to give you this if he didn't pull through," said Dr. Valentine, embracing Mrs. Valentine. "He could barely speak for the pain - and that's all he said to us, other than, "I love you guys."

He told us he loved us and he closed his eyes and never opened them again," uttered Dr. Valentine, tearfully.

I took the envelope very calmly and placed it in my purse. And then everything went black. I fainted and don't remember how I got through that morning, that day, that week or that month, but it was as plain as day in my mind that my precious, beautiful Cooper Valentine just a month before his 20th birthday had committed suicide by driving his new Porsche straight into a light pole.

His death turned off every light within me and my whole world went dark. There was no light at the end of the many tunnels in my mind. Just darkness. It was like a part of me died and was buried right along with him. The part of me that could only see darkness, and that part had overshadowed the light.

Hearing those sad words from his parents that morning, I thought I would lose my vision from the flood of tears that knew no end. I thought my brain would explode from the shock and the agony.

Fate had dealt us a losing hand, and now I felt lost and aimless, as if I was blind-folded with no idea of my own direction.

Cooper had been my sunshine. My life. My hope. My dreams. He had been all the precious things that made my life so special. Knowing him and loving him - gave me my spirit to laugh. My spirit to smile. And my spirit to be myself. Now he was gone and I didn't want to face the world or myself without him. I had hidden within myself.

I didn't read his letter that morning or the next morning. I waited two weeks before I could muster the strength to do so. And inside of the envelope was the shiny, very precious gold and diamond bracelet he used to wear all the time. It had my name engraved on it. I placed the bracelet against my lips and kissed it, then placed it on my arm.

My hands trembled and my stomach sunk deep within me and tears dropped onto the paper that cold, dry day after Christmas as I sat on the back steps reading his letter:

Hello, Pretty girl,

Excuse the lousy handwriting, but my fingers are sort of stiff and not working properly. But I guess I'm still giving you gifts. How you like that? I'm not even around, but I'm still giving you things. So I guess the same goes for my love for you, I'm not around, but my love for you will never die. Maryann, I'm going to love you forever, and forever even in heaven.

And baby, just remember whenever you're sad, that you have something that not even my death can take from you, our memories.

Chapter Five

A few weeks after his funeral, I had managed to exist. I wasn't really living, I was just alive, eating and sleeping and breathing. And then the night would come and then the sun would rise. And whenever I would leave home, I would always have to wear sunglasses to hide my sore, swollen eyes. My tears kept flowing like a river that wouldn't run dry. I had cried a river of tears for him. But layered with my pain was great anger. Anger for Freddie, Stuart, Mark and Tanner. And to add insult to injury, they all, excluding their clone of Cooper, had the nerve to show up at his funeral. They stepped into the chapel as if they owned the building. They walked in, as if they were too cool, too clean and too cute. But they were also too rotten. They all had sad faces and more flowers than anyone. Then to top that, Freddie and Mark stood up in church, sporting their expensive suits and snake skin boots. They both stood there in front of Cooper's family and friends and told obvious lies. Their phony words still make my blood boil. Because I knew how they had treated him.

"We are going to miss you, man," Mark uttered sadly, then paused and held his mouth for a second, taking a deep breath. Then

he looked at Freddie, who stood there beside him, before he continued, "You were the best singer 'Middle Ground' ever had," Mark said in the saddest, sincere voice, but it had to be a fake.

Then Freddie touched Mark's shoulders and nodded at him, then pointed toward Tanner and Stuart, who were seated toward the rear of the church, who stood up to be acknowledged, then quickly took their seats. All heads turned to look their way. Everyone in church were probably wondering how loyal and dedicated they all were to take the time out from their busy schedule to attend Cooper's funeral. But I knew better. It was all phony concern on their part.

"Yes, man, Mark said it right. We are going to miss you. No one will ever be able to fill your shoes. You were the one brain among us crazy dudes. A would be doctor. I know we used to tease you sometimes and call you 'Dr. Coo Coo.'"

After Freddie made that statement, a few people in church laughed, as he also grinned and continued to speak.

"But we only teased you like that because we wished we had your smarts. Yeah, man, you were the only one who could keep your head and keep the rest of us in check, when we would be somewhere out in left field," uttered Freddie in a sad voice, as if he could cry.

But as I sat there in church with my heart in my hand, and tears that knew no end, I had observed their sad expressions, and I had observed their truckload of flowers and their sad last words. But I didn't buy their phony display of sorrow. Because I had witnessed Cooper's hurt, and I had witnessed his pain. And I had witnessed how they ripped out his heart and handed it back to him. I was sure they didn't care anymore for Cooper than they did the dust on the floor. All they seemed to care about was their own skin, and fame. And of course, their pride and joy, their long hair. The fancy Michael Jackson's hair style sweeping across their shoulders.

Yes, Cooper had filled me in on their characters, telling me how all four of them had no respect for women. How they all felt females were just sex objects to lie down with and throw away. And

how Stuart would often brag about having a different woman in his bed every night, and sometimes two. And how after performing some nights, Mark would offer him sex from some girl that he would be getting ready to take home.

I was hipped to them. Cooper had informed me well. They may have been musically talented, but their only redeeming quality was their good looks. They thought they were the finest and the most sought after. And they never could understand Cooper for loving and sticking with me.

I was determined that day at Cooper's funeral to think of some way under the sun to get back at them for destroying Cooper's career and eventually his life, and my world. But my mind was a complete blank as to what it would be.

They even had the nerve to follow us to the cemetery, mingling with the crowd, trying to pick up girls. And I thought I would scream while standing in the cemetery when Mark and Tanner pointed at me and smiled. Then seconds later, they made their way over to stand near me.

"How are you today, beautiful? My name is Mark and this is my friend Tanner," he said reaching out his hand. "And what might your name be? Did you know the deceased?" asked Mark.

I didn't reply or look up in their faces. But they kept standing there.

"By-the-way, I know this is a sad time for everybody. But later on we are hosting a party at the Westin Hotel downtown if you feel up to coming," Tanner quickly said.

I was boiling inside, outraged at the fact that they were trying to pick me up, not realizing who I was. But I just stood there with my head down, not acknowledging them and they soon stepped away.

I was holding up pretty well, even after my brief encounter with the very arrogant Tanner and Mark, but when I read Cooper's head stone, it just hit me all over again, that he had left me and wouldn't be coming back. Plus the message his parents had engraved on the head stone was so touching. I grabbed my face and prayed to

God to give me strength to make it through the rest of the service.

Timeless Love to You
Our Love Will Embrace You Forever
From Your Mom, Your Dad
and Maryann

Cooper Valentine
Born: January 21, 1966
Died: December 16, 1985

Chapter Six

1986 rolled in with a bang for Cooper's old group. Headlines all over the city read: "Middle Ground" the new rock band, one of the hottest rock bands out. They have taken the city by storm. And they are on their way to super stardom.

But their super stardom would be very limited if I could help it. I knew revenge was wrong and couldn't bring Cooper back, but I was tired of doing right and ending up with the short end of the stick. I had major plans to bring all the big playboys face to face with the big pay back!

I rushed out of the house by 11:00 A.M. that Saturday morning, heading straight toward the O'Hare area, driving Mama's old white Chrysler. I had asked her the night before about using her car for an early morning errand. She had left the keys on the coffee table along with a note, stating that they would be at the Ford City Mall most of the day. But that was fine by me because I had a tight schedule ahead of me.

I had recently heard that the cold-hearted members of "Middle Ground" would be appearing and performing at the Rosemont Horizon in Rosemont, a good 40 minutes drive from the

south side. So I was slightly speeding a bit in Mama's old work car. But I had to work fast.

I pulled into the first Holiday Inn parking lot I spotted, rushed inside for a room, and started my little project by dying my black hair to a deep auburn red and let dry and styled, and after that, changed into a sultry black outfit. It wasn't really me, but I wasn't trying to be myself. I just wanted to get close to Stuart, Tanner, Freddie, Mark and of course, the new Mr. Cooper Valentine, whatever his real name was, and my outfit and hairdo, and the black net over my face had me camouflaged -- but good. And, of course, I would need five alarm clocks.

After I was dressed in my wild attire, I sat on the edge of the bed biting my fingernail, anxious and nervous about what I had to somehow pull off. Then a few seconds later, I sprang from the bed, pulled the curtains back and looked out shaking my head. It was another gloomy Saturday evening, just as every day had been since the new year. I had nothing to hope for and no bright days ahead. And here it was only 11 days before Valentine's Day. It was our favorite holiday. Cooper always got me a dozen white roses, and I always got him a dozen red roses. This Valentine's Day would have been our fourth Valentine's Day together.

It was bitter cold out with heavy blowing snow, which made it almost impossible to see the highway, but that didn't stop me. And it was going to be a standing room only show. But, of course, I had Cooper's old keys to all of their dressing rooms.

The time finally rolled around, it was 4:00 pm when I unlocked the door to Tanner's dressing room, after just seeing them 30 minutes earlier dining at the elegant Rosewood restaurant. Now I would have plenty of time to enter each of their rooms and leave them each a note and an alarm clock. And by 4:30 pm, I had completed half of my task. I had placed a note and a red rose on each of their beds. The note read:

"I know you go on stage at 8:00 pm for your first show. So I'll see you at 5:30 pm. You won't be disappointed!

Signed,

Passion"

I left the same note on each of their beds, only changing the times to make it 20 minutes apart. And by 5:30 sharp, I was knocking at Tanner's door. Tanner Smith, the drummer, the tall, 6 foot 2 inch, 180 pound, well-built, baby-faced, brown-eyed, high yellow, bleached-blonde and the pretty boy of the group. Before Cooper joined their group, they had tried to throw Tanner on center stage but he couldn't sing a bit, and even worse, he had zero stage presence.

He stretched his door open and I walked into his dressing room as if I owned the place. I was wearing a skin tight black leather mini and red high heeled shoes with a black net over my face.

Tanner hadn't said a word as he quickly shut the door and just stared at me. He was standing there in his all white leather, then glanced at his gold, diamond watch and grinned at me.

"Don't keep me waiting, Ms....I didn't get your name."

"No, you didn't." I walked closer and tiptoed and placed my lips against his. And with one lift of the hand he had me up in his strong arms, bringing his mouth down on mine and I gave my kisses to him.

It was destroying me inside to be kissed by and in the arms of a man who had indirectly taken the life of my precious Cooper. But it was the only way.

"Slow down, Cutie," I whispered, "Let's get comfortable. Slip off your shoes, unbutton that top, let me pour a glass of wine."

He sat there on the edge of the bed counting the seconds before he would get me in his bed.

"Girl, you don't miss a trick, do you? You brought your own wine. How cool. Now get over here, because I'm ready to get laid by you. Girl, what in the hell is your name? Not that I need to know your name before I bed you down." He paused and stared at my net covered eyes. "But come to think about it, you do look mighty familiar. Do I know you from somewhere?" he asked.

I shook my head, "No." And my hand trembled as I handed him the wine. He looked dead in my eyes and winked as he lifted the glass to his lips.

"A fox like you can walk into my room anytime," he grinned and licked his lips. "Now I want to hear some clothes hitting the floor."

It took longer than 20 minutes to finish in Tanner's room but I managed to sneak out within 23.

I managed to reach nearly all the others' rooms and pay them the little visit my heart led me to do. The two lead guitarists, Freddie and Stuart Larson were as easy as pie. But the bass player, Mark Franklin, the smart mouth who masterminded the clause that caused Cooper to be rejected from the group, was not an easy task. He almost ripped my clothes off before I could get him where I wanted him. Then, finally, when I entered the new Mr. Cooper Valentine's room, I almost blew my cover. For a moment, I almost got lost in his shiny, green eyes, for they were the exact shade of Cooper's. But, of course, he was probably wearing contacts. He looked so much like my Cooper, but I managed. I had finished my task and soon it would be broadcast all across the country.

It was 7:50 pm, I had changed my attire, sitting out in the auditorium, smiling inside for the first time since Cooper's death. I was thinking to myself, "Their new year won't be so bright either!" Revenge was sweet. And all it took to set them up was to lead them into thinking I was going to sleep with them.

I set all the clocks for 7:57; that gave them enough time to run on stage, not realizing they had been given a sleeping potion!

The curtains went up at 8:00 and one by one the members of

"Middle Ground" rushed out on the stage. They bowed in their sharp white leather outfits and within minutes of their appearance, the crowds started laughing, loud and louder. And then throwing things at them.

Then they looked at each other and pointed. Each one thinking the other is the disgrace. Then they all grabbed their heads and ran off stage. Their heads were bald.

The pretty boys of the Midwest had been publicly disgraced in front of millions of people and it made my heart scream with joy. If only Cooper could have seen it. He would have been so proud of me. For I had brought them to shame in a matter of the same lousy 20 minutes it had taken them to destroy Cooper's career and eventually his life.

As the curtains went down, I was sitting there still smiling, but I felt warm tears rolling down my face. I pulled a tissue from my purse and dried my tears. And as I stood to walk out of the building and make my way through the crowd, I screamed to myself, "Happy New Year! You bastards!"

The next day, the local paper read:

> "*The ever popular rock band, 'Middle Ground' rocks the world in one year, and, with their new image, their fans are in an uproar.*"

And a couple weeks later, I read in the papers, that their new singer hightailed back to Los Angeles, leaving them high and dry, using substitutes and fill-ins for all their gigs.

Chapter Seven

Around mid-June, the loneliness and craving for Cooper had not subsided. He was as heavy on my mind as ever.

It was a hot Saturday afternoon, the sun felt hot enough to scorch the grass. I had just gotten home after working a very busy four-hour shift, so I felt dead on my feet, especially since I was up late the night before studying for a test in my math class. And by 2:30 p.m., while I was napping on the living room sofa, the doorbell rang.

I sat straight up, yawning, jolted awake by the loud ding-dong. Then I glanced at the clock on the wall above the fireplace sluggishly making my way across the floor to the door, stretched it open and there stood Janet with a long face.

"Hey. Girl. Come on in," I said, rubbing my eyes.

"What you guys doing? It sounds pretty quiet in here," she mumbled sadly, stepping inside, headed across the room toward the twin sofas.

"That's because it is. I was just taking a nap. I guess Mama headed downtown. What's up? You seem a bit down and irritated about something," I uttered, concerned.

"That's because I am," she mumbled taking a seat on the

couch with her head down.

I slapped her on the knee, taking a seat beside her.

"Hold your head up. It can't be that bad. Can it?" I asked.

She kept her head down. "Yes, it can. And it is," she grabbed her face. "I hate Jimmie," she cried.

"Why? What happened?" I asked.

"He told me he's not ready to make a commitment to me at the moment. Those were his exact words," she said.

I rubbed her shoulder, "Well, don't cry about it. He just needs time. You know he's crazy about you, Girl," I uttered sincerely.

"But, Maryann. I don't know that. And you're always saying how crazy he is about me. Well, why don't I know it?" she asked in my eyes with a sad, pitiful gaze. "And besides, I thought after we got heavy into doing it a lot, he would want to make a commitment. I guess I was some fool to think that. But that was the main reason I started doing it with him. But the more I go to bed with him, the more he wants, and the less time he wants to spend with me," she sniffled. "And I tell you! I'm pulling my hair out trying to figure out that crazy ass boy. He is so wishy washy. Sometimes I feel like I'm the one. The only one he's thinking of. Then again, Maryann, just like that," she shook her head staring down at the floor. "I look at him and his eyes and thoughts seem a million miles away - thinking of someone else."

"Slow down," I touched her arm, "Back up for a second. And could you run that by me again? The part about the more you go to bed together, the more he wants, and the less time he wants to spend with you?" I asked.

"What didn't you understand, Maryann?" she glanced over at me and back down to the floor.

"The part about the less time he wants to spend with you. Because it sounds to me that he wants to spend a lot of time with you," I patted her knee. "Because, think about what you just said, the more you make out, the more he wants."

"Yes, Maryann. That's true. But that's just it!" She hollered angrily. "He wants to spend all our time together doing it, and he's not interested in going to the movies or out to dinner or anything anymore! And I tell you, I don't know what to think. I'm just so upset! And hopping in the sack with him all the time has become somewhat less enchanting, especially since he's not ready to make a commitment," she explained tearfully.

"Do you mean get engaged, Janet?"

"No," she shook her head. "Are you crazy? Never! I'm not ready to get married, and I'm not sure I would marry Jimmie if I was," she snapped.

"Well, what is all this commitment stuff about if it's not about getting engaged?" I asked.

"Maryann, I want a commitment from Jimmie to know I'm his woman, and he's my man."

"Well, you are his woman. And he is your man," I nodded.

She shook her head, "He said he needs time to think about us. And I don't know what in the hell he's talking about. That's why I can honestly say, I don't know if I would marry Jimmie if he did ask me."

I smiled, nodding up and down in her eyes. "You know you would, you're just upset right now. You love that boy."

"You're damn right I'm upset, Maryann, and right now just to show Jimmie I'm not sitting around waiting for him to give me a ring, I'm thinking about calling up one of those 'Middle Ground hunks.'"

"Middle Ground?" I asked as my mouth fell open with surprise that she would mention them.

"Yes! Why not? Those guys are too hot! I would like to make it with one of them, that's for sure," she said as a tiny smile came to her face.

"Make it with one of them? What do you mean? Janet?" I asked quite irritated.

"You know. Go out with one of them and be wined and

dined in style," she said with a big smile across her tear-streaked face.

"Janet. What are you saying? I know you're kidding. Those guys are sluts. And believe me, they're not looking to wine and dine any woman, unless there's something in it for them. You hear me!"

"I know. I've heard. Who cares? They are hunks. The hottest. They are all dolls in the face. Lean, handsome and packing. That's the kind of guy I need," she said excitedly - wiping her tears with her fingers.

"Well, that sounds like Jimmie. He's lean, and could be considered fairly handsome....But what does packing mean?" I asked.

"It means Jimmie isn't packing," she grinned, shaking her head.

"He isn't packing what?" I grinned.

"He isn't packing any cash," she laughed.

I laughed, "Well, if that's what it means, I guess you're right. Cause Jimmie is always broke."

"I know that's right," she said in a disappointed voice. "And that's another thing, Maryann. I'm sick of all the bar and grills when we go out to eat, never fine dining, because his broke tail can't afford it." She paused, staring into space," and Maryann, you know, I'm not trying to come down on him, but he really doesn't seem interested in doing anything about his situation. Cause if you ask me, he seems content making nickels and dimes at that two-bit supermarket!" she looked me in the eyes with a serious expression. "And I'm sure you have noticed that too. We're in college trying to get an education so we can have a bright future ahead of us, but look at my fabulous boyfriend. He's not even interested in getting a degree in anything," she explained.

"Look, Janet. I know it looks that way right now. But we are all still pretty young. Who knows? He could get his act together and start college soon," I explained.

"Maybe, but I don't think so. And if he doesn't, I'm not sure we're going to make it. Because I want something out of life. And

not just a small piece of pie. I want the whole pie. I'm going places. And I want my man to be going places," she pulled a cigarette from her shirt pocket and lit it up.

"Let me get you an ashtray," I uttered, rising from the sofa to fetch an ashtray from the fireplace mantle. "Here you are, Janet," I handed her the small, round, glass ashtray, sitting back beside her.

She laughed out, "And another thing about 'Middle Ground,' listen to this."

"Yes," I smiled. "What's so funny?"

"Well, it's something I heard about those four dream boats."

"Now, what? I'm sure I have heard everything there is to know about those guys. Cooper filled me in - all but good."

"Well, they are the American dream for any girl. They're good looking, nicely built, and have climbed the musical ladder of success to the point of rolling in dough, with the exception of Tanner, who was born into money, I hear," she took another puff from her cigarette. "Did you read that article in Jet about Tanner's parentage and where all their bucks came from?"

I shook my head, not the least bit interested in discussing "Middle Ground."

"Well, listen to this! I read that his folks are so loaded because his grandfather, who happened to be a white man, deeded 4,000 acres of prime land in Springfield, Illinois to Tanner's dad, back in the mid-seventies. But this was only after old man Smith was on his death bed. Tanner's Dad hadn't been recognized by the old man before that. And the article also stated that he had been a tightwad all his life, not giving one red cent to charity or anyone. But on his deathbed, he made sure Tanner's Dad inherited every dime he had," she paused in my eyes. "Isn't that something?"

"Yes, it is. But it's also something how you are suddenly into those guys."

"Maryann, I see that look on your face. But don't worry. I'm not illusional where Tanner is concerned. I already know they only go for the prettiest girls in town with the perfect figures. So,

I'm not about to kid myself - thinking my big ass and flat chest will pull any of them my way. But I can dream, honey, and that's what I'm doing," she giggled. "But now, you, on the other hand are a different story," she poked me with her elbow. "You have a figure to die for. And I'm sure they would all line up for you. But do you care? Hell, no. You get all the breaks and all the real hunks falling at your feet. But you're stuck in a rut and won't even consider dating anyone," she patted my hand. "But I guess I can understand how you need more time."

"Thank you for understanding. Cause more time is definitely what I need. Cause Janet, I know Cooper is dead. But in my head he's still very much alive, and in my heart I still belong to him."

"I understand."

"Thanks. But listen, Janet, forget those guys. And believe me, honey, you're not fat. There's nothing wrong with your chest and butt. You are a little plump, but it looks good on you," I touched her knee. "And I bet Jimmie would agree. He loves your bosom and derriere," I grinned.

"Sure he does. Cause he's no prize himself," she snickered. "Anyway, Maryann. Come off it. You always try to make me feel better about my extra pounds. But anybody with two eyes can see my rump has too much fat right there," she pointed to her behind.

She stared at me and we both laughed. She was too blunt and too funny sometimes. But at least now she seemed in a better mood than when she arrived.

"I might as well face the facts and go on a diet quick - so I don't end up like my mother - weighing 300 pounds, and dying of heart failure before her thirtieth birthday. And rumor had it for years that her obesity is what caused Daddy to leave her back in South Carolina, dragging Pam and I to Chicago when I was barely six and Pam was still in diapers."

"Get real, Janet. I don't think you'll ever have to worry about obesity. I think you just like to borrow headaches."

"I'm not borrowing headaches. When shit runs in the family,

that is a headache. And it's time to worry about it, so you can make sure you beat it, before it beats you," she mashed out her cigarette, immediately lighting up another Virginia Slim. "Anyway, Maryann. Back to what I was saying, and to make a long story short, Tanner, Mark, Freddie and Stuart have everything going for them," she touched my arm and gave me a devilish stare, "Plus their band equipment isn't all they are equipped with."

I stared back waiting to hear what she had to say.

"I heard they are well endowed."

"So," I kept gazing in her eyes. "Whatever," I shook my head, snickering. "I can't believe you're sitting here talking about the sizes of their privates," I kept snickering.

"Well, why not? I like big ones - don't you?"

"Sure, don't we all?"

"So, there you go. Take your pick, Maryann. They are all hung."

"I see, Janet. And not that I really care to know who relayed this bit of information to you, but who in the hell told you this?" I laughed. "Is there anything you don't know about anybody? Instead of paying the Sun Times every morning, I think I'll call you up and get my news free and save myself the quarter," I laughed.

"One of the tellers at work mentioned it," she puffed her cigarette, blowing smoke toward me, which I was quickly fanning with my hands.

"But this teller actually said Cathy Thomas who is a friend of hers mentioned it."

"Okay. I get it now. This is all about Tanner, not the entire group. Cathy Thomas dates Tanner Smith. He's the one with the big you-know-what?" I nodded, thinking back to what I had overheard in that closet.

"Maryann, no. I didn't hear it like that I heard they're all very equipped, Mark, Freddie, Stuart and Tanner."

"Whatever, Janet. I'm sure I don't care."

"Well, I know you have this indifferent attitude where

'Middle Ground' is concerned, but you're giggling and smiling and conversing, so you must find something amusing. Could it be you're smiling about the same thing I am? Cathy Thomas is supposed to be dating Tanner, but she seems to know the sizes of all their cocks. Lucky girl," she winked and slapped my knee. "Could it be - they're all dicking her?" she laughed out.

"Janet! No! Way! I don't think so," I shook my head. "Cathy Thomas seems a bit wild and flirty. But she doesn't seem loose like that. She's in a couple of my classes, you know. She's no Jezebel or tramp. But she is wild about Tanner."

"I can see why, Maryann. What a lucky woman. But she has that sultry look that would snag him."

"I guess so. She is pretty. But, anyway, how in the world did we get off the subject of you and Jimmie and on the subject of Cathy Thomas and Tanner?"

"Oh, yeah. Jimmie," her smile faded.

"Yeah, Jimmie. Your man. Remember him?"

She frowned, "I'm trying not to."

"Come on. Things are gonna get better. So anyway, as you were saying about him."

"Maryann," she touched my arm, staring straight in my face. "You can mark my word. This is the last time you'll ever see me cry over some guy," she paused, shook her head, taking another drag from her cigarette. "I love Jimmie. That's true enough. But I refuse to be made to feel like some little pushover who's being used and tossed aside. So if he can't get his act together and start treating me right, then I'm kicking him to the curb," she said in a strong, serious voice.

I nodded, "I understand, Girlfriend," I touched her arm, "God knows I was blessed with a man who treated me with the greatest respect. And Cooper didn't just have respect for me, he had respect for all women," I uttered, staring into space thinking of him.

"You're right about that. That was his way. His nature. His sweet soul. But his cousin is certainly lacking in that department,"

she replied. "And it never ceases to amaze me how, Jimmie and Cooper, who are two sister's kids turned out so different from each other. But then, maybe again I can. Because Mrs. Ruth Tyler did raise Jimmie all by herself after his father was killed in the army when Jimmie was only eight months old. And he said it was always hard for his Mom to make ends meet when he was growing up. But you know, Maryann, a struggle like that should have made him more determined to make something of his life."

"Janet, I know. But let's hope Jimmie gets his act together."

"Yeah. Let's hope. Because like I said. I'm planning to make something of my life and I want a strong man beside me with the same focus. And I hope it's Jimmie. But if he doesn't shape up soon, he's out the door," she stressed strongly.

An hour after Janet left, while sitting on the sofa flipping through an Essence Magazine and listening to an Elton John cassette, the doorbell was ringing again. I strolled across the floor more alert than earlier, expecting to pull the door open to Janet's face again, but I stretched the door open and there stood Mark Franklin and Stuart Larson with big grins on their faces. But I was stunned, wondering if they had shown up to get pay back for the trick I had pulled on them.

"Hello, Miss Brooks," Mark said, "You are every bit as hot looking as I heard. Then some! Suddenly, my once limited respect for the late Mr. Valentine has escalated to the roof! Cause, got damn! You are one hot Babe!" he licked his lips, "And we finally meet," he rubbed his chin, looking me up and down.

"What are you guys doing here? What do you want anyway?" I asked nervously, somewhat frightened.

"We would like to pay our respects about Cooper if your parents don't mind," Stuart relayed loudly, as his clear brown eyes roamed around the room.

I glanced over my shoulder, knowing nobody was home except me.

"So, Miss Brooks, you wanna ask your parents if it's okay if

we come inside for a small visit to pay our respects to you for Cooper?" Stuart asked with an arrogance to his voice.

"Look, my parents are not here, okay. Now get the hell out of my door before I call the cops," I stated very crossly.

"Now what would you call the cops for my Sweet? Are we doing anything wrong or harassing you? No! But they may be real interested in throwing a Babe like you behind bars for pulling that cruel little trick you pulled on us," Stuart roared, exchanging looks with Mark, focusing back to me with a serious expression.

I stood there with a straight face, not giving myself away. "I'm not kidding. I will call the police! If you two don't leave right now!" I said loudly, giving them an angry stare.

Marked humped up his broad shoulders as if he didn't have a care in the world.

"So go on! Call the cops!" Mark dared me, as they stepped right past me into the living room.

I left the door pulled open as I stood not far from it, trying to look brave and trying to act brave. But my legs felt wobbly with fear. And before I could scream, "Don't close that door!" Mark had stepped right past me and slammed it shut.

"So this is the Miss Brooks who left all of our hair on the hotel carpet? And we're not too happy about that," Mark shook his head. "But as you can see," he pointed to his ear-length feathered-back hair style, "It's growing back very nicely and we look as good as ever....So get this, Babe. We're here to make a sweet little deal with you," he folded his arms, giving me a serious look, "If you be good to us, we'll forget all about the cruel hair trick," he winked. "So, what you say, Girl? You think you're up to what we got in mind?"

"Look! Guys, you better get out of my house while the getting is good! I don't have any business with any of you! And I don't know what you're up to, but if my Daddy catches you here, it's going to be trouble! Because just so you can know, he keeps a gun in the house! So just leave, okay!" I asked loudly with a bitter edge,

pointing toward the door.

Mark stepped toward me with a sly smile and downcast eyes. He gripped my shoulders, pushing me against the wall, and as I struggled to break free, he slowly shook his head, pinning my arms against the wall over my head.

"We don't like your little attitude, luscious lips," he licked his lips, smiling down at me as his soft brown eyes burned with desire, as he breathed heavy just inches from my face, "We are trying to be nice to you," he glanced across the room and nodded at Stuart, and he nodded back.

"We know you are sultry and gorgeous and all that," he said in a low, sensuous voice, looking at my mouth as if he was just seconds away from trying to swallow me up, "but being as sexy as you are, doesn't put you above the law," he said in a low, husky voice, staring me eye-to-eye, "So, I say, stop bitching and lighten up. Or keep acting the way you are, and just get ready to be locked up," he said in a whisper against my face, as I laid with my back and head braced against the wall, trembling and scared stiff of what they were up to.

"He's right! You know! You need to loosen up and stop hollering at us, and telling us to get out," Stuart quickly added, as he was pacing back and forth every few minutes, glancing out the living room window.

"Now is that any way to treat two famous members of 'Middle Ground?'" Stuart asked from across the room peeking out of the front door, closing it easily and stepping back across the floor where we stood, shaking his head, "I say, Hell no!"

Stuart hollered, pointing his finger at my nose, holding his face just inches away, "Because we can throw the book at your fine ass," he nodded. "How would you like to go up to the big house? Do some time in the slammer?" he winked at me, rubbing his chin, stepping backward, glancing down the length of my body, focusing on my legs, "You are one hot package. Look at those fine legs," he exchanged looks with Mark and they both grinned.

"Damn! Where did Valentine find you? I know he was one happy dude while he was still alive and kicking! So how does it feel, knowing you're getting ready to make two of his ex-band members very happy?" Stuart asked, still admiring my legs.

I tore loose from Mark and he grabbed me just as quickly, slamming me back against the wall, with his arms as cushions, as if he was trying to make sure not to hurt me, grabbing my face, massaging my cheeks as he leaned his face just inches from mine.

I noticed Stuart standing aside, looking on, rubbing his hands and smiling, "I think she gets off on knowing we're so hot for her," Stuart grinned.

"Is that right, Girl? Are you all turned-on cause we're bursting out of our breeches over you? If it is, don't be so mean. Give a poor boy a kiss. I'm standing here dying to stick my tongue between your smooth lips and taste you," he taunted me. "Just one kiss and we're out the door," he grinned. "So what do you say?"

I shook my head, fuming as I stared dead in his eyes.

"Hell! No!" I shouted and stuck my tongue out at him.

Mark looked up at the ceiling and shook his head, then glanced over at Stuart and they both laughed.

"Look, Sexy. Don't stick your tongue out at me again. Please. I'm trying to be a gentleman here and ask your permission for a kiss. So please don't tempt me," Mark uttered, breathless.

"Gentleman, my foot! You never!" I shouted in his face.

"So, you wanna play hard to get, I see?" he glanced over his shoulder and beckoned for Stuart, who had stepped over to look out the window again.

When Stuart walked over and stood to the side, Mark looked at him and grinned.

"Should I take a kiss from Miss Brooks here or not? Whatever you say goes. Man. If you say take a kiss, I will. If you say leave her alone, I will. It's your call," Mark stated seriously with a straight face.

I gave Stuart the most humble look I could muster up, hoping

he would show some respect. But he merely stared at me with a smirk on his face as he spoke to Mark.

"Okay. Man. Let me get this straight. Whatever I say goes?" Stuart asked.

Mark nodded, "That's right, Man. The ball is in your park."

"Well, in that case," Stuart laughed, rubbing his hands together, "I say this! Forget the lousy smack on the lips. Stop begging her for a kiss. I say let's strip her now," he glanced at his watch. "We have plenty of time. Plus there's nobody home. We can hit that and be out of here in ten minutes flat," he laughed.

Mark nodded, still looking dead in my eyes.

Stuart tapped Mark's shoulder, "Okay, you with me on this Man? You hold her while I tear off that shit she's wearing, and we take turns smacking that steaming hot little body," he paused. "How is that? Sound like a plan?" Stuart asked, grinning.

"Hell, yes. It sounds like a terrific plan to me," Mark agreed, glancing at him then back to face me, "See Girl. You were better off letting me suck on one of those hot lips. But no. You couldn't say yes to one kiss," he shook his head, smiling. "Now look what has happened? The stakes are higher. Stuart has spoken and he says you should give us a piece. And by doing so, that will wash the slate clean and we'll be even. So do we have a deal Miss Hot Stuff?" He gazed in my eyes, nodding up and down, "Damn! You look good enough to eat! And breathing in your sweet perfume is making me want to explode! Girl, your looks are dangerous. Just your sexy eyes alone have driven me all the way already."

"So don't keep us waiting. What's the word?" Stuart asked standing to the side.

"Hell! No!" I screamed bitterly, shaking, anxious and scared out of my wits. So upset that I could barely get my words out.

Mark exchanged looks with Stuart, released me and walked over to Stuart and gave him a high five on both hands, as they both were laughing.

"I don't see a darn thing funny! But I know I'm not putting

up with any more garbage! If you guys want to press charges -- go on, press charges!" I propped both hands on my hips. "I don't give a flying hoot! Yeah! I pulled that trick on all of you low-down bastards! You deserved it. You killed my Cooper. You're no better than a straight up murderer!" I pointed my finger at both of them. "Now I guess you want to add rape to your long list of vices!" I roared bitterly.

They kept laughing and shaking their heads.

"Laugh all you want. But I'm telling you now. You won't get away with it! Okay!" I screamed angrily.

They kept grinning, not taking me seriously at all. Then they both stopped laughing, looked at me and winked, pointing their finger at me.

"Got you!" they both said loudly, as they headed toward the door.

Mark pulled the door open as they stepped out on the porch, and I followed, fuming, yet confused at their behavior, propping myself against the door facing, as they stepped across the porch, down the steps to Mark's silver Mercedes. And while standing at the front of the car, Mark took his right hand and gave me a salute.

"We got you good. Babe! We had you going! We just wanted you to know we figured you out. And by the time we did, we all had a big laugh about it. Because, Girl. You deserved an award for pulling that one off as clever as we all are. You got us good. And we just got you back! We're not calling the cops. Never intended to. We just wanted to give you a good scare," he exchanged looks with Stuart, who was standing over by the passenger door. "And I think we did."

"Yeah. She'll probably run and change her underwear when we leave. I'm sure she pissed all over herself in there, thinking the worst would happen," Stuart laughed.

"But let me set the record straight, Pretty Girl. We didn't drive Cooper to crash his car into that pole and over in that damn gully. He had a mind of his own! Nobody controlled Cooper

Valentine. And you should know that better than anyone!" Mark said sharply and glanced down at the driveway and back at me.

"We are not the heavy here! Okay! And we may be many things, but a rapist isn't one of them!" he grinned. "I will admit," he narrowed his eyes and rubbed his chin, looking me straight up and down, "I would love to get in your drawers. But I have never taken a piece of ass from any chick. And I don't plan to start now," Mark said quite seriously.

"But seriously, Girl," Stuart cut in. "We didn't have it in for Cooper. He was cool with us. He was one of us. The main man. The big time vocalist. We're sorry about what happened to him. But those are the twisted breaks! But life goes on!" Stuart relayed in a serious voice.

"Where do you get off saying Cooper was one of you? He may have been your singer! But he didn't have anything else in common with any of you! Cause for one, he didn't whore around with lots of girls," I yelled off the porch.

Stuart and Mark exchanged looks and laughed at my statement. And Mark went to say something, but Stuart held up one finger.

"So he didn't whore around with different girls. What's the difference? He whored around with you. He still got laid from sun up to sun down - that's our motto. Got to get the good stuff while we're still young. Cause when the gray hair comes along with the arthritis, fishing season is over," Stuart laughed, and Mark slapped his hand on the top of the car and laughed too.

"Just please! Get in your car and leave! I'm not amused at your little visit. And if you think I should be thanking you for not pressing the issue about cutting off your hair - too bad! Because I could care less!" I hollered out at them.

"Girl. You have a chip the size of a car on your shoulders, I see," Stuart laughed loudly, getting into the car on the passenger side.

"Yes. She does! But she's so damn good looking! Maybe

she's pissed because we didn't give her what she's aching for. Cause you know old Cooper has been gone a pretty long time," Mark said loudly in a joking voice.

"Kiss my ass!" I yelled out at them, then quickly slammed the front door, falling with my back against it.

I could hear Mark's mouth from the outside.

"Be careful what you ask for. You might just get it. Bring your fine ass back out here and see if I don't take you up on that offer!" he hollered.

"Yeah! We both will!" Stuart hollered too.

Chapter Eight

Exactly two weeks later, on another scorcher of a day, Janet and I had decided to paint the town red. She had mentioned being tired of seeing me cooped up inside acting like a hermit. So I got all dressed up in my best black mini and purple high heels with my hair down loosely sweeping across my shoulders. And when Janet came by to pick me up, she was all smiles as I headed to her car.

"Maryann, you look fabulous," she laughed with her head sticking out of the driver's window.

"Yes. She does," Mama agreed standing in the doorway. "Janet, thanks for getting her out of this house. Cause me and her father been telling her for months to start getting out of this house so she can have some fun and enjoy herself."

"Believe me, Mrs. Brooks, where we're going, she'll have some fun tonight. I'm taking her to a place where the music is so loud and the people dance so hard until you forget all your sorrows," Janet said, starting up the motor and backing out of the driveway.

Mama laughed, "That sounds alright to me, Janet. You girls enjoy yourselves, okay," Mama waved at us. We waved back.

Shortly, Janet had hit the expressway heading downtown. I glanced at my watch and it was only 7:00 p.m.

"Let's stop at Bennigan's first," I suggested.

"Bennigan's? What for? There's nothing going on at Bennigan's. We're heading to the Rush Street area," she uttered excitedly.

"That's cool with me, Janet. Wherever you got in mind. But I would like to stop at Bennigan's first for a bite to eat. I'm starving if you must know. And if I plan to drink this evening, the way I plan to drink, I need to put something in my stomach first."

"Okay. That's cool. It's early anyway. Which Bennigan's did you have in mind?" she glanced over at me and flashed me a big smile. "You are going to have big fun tonight, Girlfriend. You hear me? Big fun," Janet kept smiling.

"I hope you're right. Cause I feel like I'm dying inside. And day by day I keep hoping I'll feel better, but I don't. I wake up with the same old dull ache inside of me. Janet I want to stop this pain!" I shouted with sadness in my voice. Then I felt a tear making its way down my right cheek. But I wiped it away quickly with my fingers.

"Maryann," she glanced at me quickly, touching my knee. "Everything will work out for you. Your pain will leave. You just got to allow yourself to help yourself get rid of some of your sorrows. And by getting out the way you have decided to do this evening is a great start," she paused, pulling into the loop section.

"We're still going to Bennigan's, right?" I asked.

"Sure. But you never did say which one. Does it matter?" she asked.

"Not really, I guess. But Cooper and I used to go to the one over on Madison and Clinton. Remember when all four of us got together there last summer? Those were the good times," I reminded her.

"Okay. Madison and Clinton it is," she said, heading that way.

I had made a pact with myself to see how many glasses of wine it would take before I got rid of the dull ache inside of my soul.

The evening rolled on fast and soon it was the middle of the

night, and we had found a permanent spot at Mother's night club. Janet and I had been dancing and drinking up a storm, me more than her. But now we were seated at our table because I couldn't seem to stand too well.

"Maryann. I think we should leave! You have gotten sloppy drunk. You're falling out of your chair. Look at you!" Janet roared agitated.

I tried to sit straight in my chair, but I could barely keep my balance. "I'll be okay. I'm not about to go home right now. I'm having fun. And that's what you want, remember? You want me to have fun."

"Yes, Maryann. I want you to have fun. But not like this," she shook her head.

"Not like what? What am I doing?" I asked.

"It's just that. You have had too much, and this place is crawling with guys!" She glanced around the room, "And can't you see how they are all looking at you like you are a piece of meat," she explained.

I glanced around. "Nobody is looking at me," I pointed my finger at her. "It's all in your head, Janet, and so what if they were? People have a right to look at whoever they want to. Now isn't that right?" I asked, trying to keep my balance.

"Maryann. You don't get it. Guys prey on drunk females, okay? You got that?" she pointed her finger back at me. "That's why I'm getting you out of here!" she glanced around the room again, "Before you end up on the back seat of Jack's car and hate yourself tomorrow," she said seriously.

"Who's Jack?" I asked.

"See what I mean? You are wasted. I'm getting you home."

"No! I'm not leaving! I'm having fun. This glass of wine is my friend," I held up the empty glass and looked at it. "You said I should stop setting around crying over Cooper and get out more, so I'm not crying and I'm out. So you should be happy," I grabbed the shirt tail of a passing waiter.

"Yes," he smiled. "Can I get you something?" he asked.

"Yes. You sure can. I'll take another white wine," I replied.

"One white wine coming right up," he pointed to Janet, "Anything for you?"

Janet shook her head.

When he got back with the glass of wine, I was rambling through my purse trying to find some more money, but couldn't locate a dime. I had spent all my money on drinks, no wonder I was seeing double.

"Janet, loan me $4.00 until we get home?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes at me. "Forget it Maryann. You don't need another stinking drink! You already can't even stand up! No way! Okay! Now can we go?" she fussed.

"No! I want my drink. Plus you said Jimmie was meeting us here by 10:00."

I remained seated, and the waiter looked at me, "Do you want this drink or not?"

"Yes. She does. It's on me," said a familiar voice in the crowd. Then I looked around and there stood Mark, Stuart, Freddie and Tanner.

Mark pulled a $10.00 bill from his pocket and gave it to the waiter. "Keep the change," he smiled.

The waiter handed me the tall glass of wine and strutted away quite pleased.

I glanced at Janet who dropped back in her seat with her hands over her cheeks and mouth open. The surprised look in her eyes said it all, she was pleased to be in their company.

"For the rest of the evening, whatever you ladies want it's on us," Mark relayed.

"Thanks guys. I hate your guts. But I'm in no mood right now for grudges," I held up my glass to them. "There's no animosity in this glass of wine. I'm just out to have fun, fun, fun," I said laughingly.

They all started pulling up chairs and sitting at our table.

And the way Janet was staring at them, I thought she was going to jump on one of their laps. I had a feeling she was going to be a chatterbox.

"I didn't know you guys hung out here," she uttered with a big smile across her face.

Freddie was sitting to her left and leaned toward her trying to talk over the music, "That's because you don't know us guys. We hang out wherever."

"I see," she said, all smiles. "And I guess you all know you're sinfully handsome," she said, glancing from one to the other.

But they seemed less enchanted with her yapping, not looking her way. But to show a bit of attention, Stuart flashed her a quick smile and a wink.

"Guys, since all of you already know Maryann, and of course you would, since Cooper was your singer. But what I'm trying to say, is I'm Janet," she held up both hands, "But no introductions are necessary," she paused looking from one to the other "Because just as most of the city, I know all of your names."

Janet was talking away, she wouldn't stop blathering, but all four of them were looking straight at me, and why I didn't know. I didn't feel pretty and I didn't feel sexy. I just felt loaded and alone. And my good sense was telling me that I shouldn't be drinking and mingling with them, but somehow the booze had overshadowed my bitterness toward them.

"Look, Girls," Mark said, looking from me to Janet. "We are throwing a house party later on, if you girls want to be our guests."

Janet replied quickly, "Sure. I been dying to see the inside of your big house anyway. That place is huge. Is it true what they wrote in the Tribune that you inherited it four years ago on your eighteenth birthday from your great grandfather?" she kept gabbing, then glanced at me. "That sounds great. Doesn't it, Maryann?"

I looked at her and nodded, knowing I was in no shape for a party or more drinks. And before they showed up, she thought the same. But apparently she had forgotten my condition and was only

thinking about being with one of them.

Suddenly, Janet jumped up from the table and walked over to whisper in my ear, "I'm going to page Jimmie once more. And if he doesn't call back in the next five minutes, we're leaving with these hunks. I'll be right back."

Janet headed through the crowd to find a pay phone and Mark asked, "Where's she headed?" mashing out his cigarette and downing his Martini in one gulp.

"She has to make a call. She'll be right back," I replied.

They all exchanged looks and Freddie said rather loudly, "I think we should blow this joint," rising from his seat. Then the others stood.

Mark held out his hand, "You're coming with us, Babe?"

I glanced around at the crowd, trying to spot Janet, "Well, maybe. But Janet isn't back yet. We got to wait for her," I suggested.

"No way! We're out of here. If you're coming, let's go. You won't have to buy any drinks at this party," Mark grinned.

I staggered, reaching for my purse, then propped myself against the table, "I would love to have some of your free drinks, but I can't leave without Janet. We came here together, you know," I stressed.

"Look! Babe! No harm intended, but we're not interested in your friend Janet. She's not our idea of a Babe," Freddie relayed with a smile.

"That's right. We do have a reputation to uphold," Stuart quickly added.

"What are you guys talking about? If my friend isn't welcome, then I'm not coming," I said firmly.

Mark and Tanner exchanged words that I couldn't hear, then Tanner stepped away for a few minutes and returned smiling.

"Okay. Let's hit the road. I just had a chat with your friend, what's her name and she said she'll meet us there," Tanner laughed.

"Meet us where?" I asked.

"At our place," Tanner answered.

"Well, why can't she come now?" I asked.

"Hell, beats me. She's still on the phone yapping with somebody," Tanner answered.

"Okay. I'm ready," I replied as Mark grabbed my arm, walking me through the crowd.

I slept all the way to their house, and all I could remember was dozing in and out - and seeing the other three cars through the rear view mirror following me and Mark in his silver Mercedes. But the sleep didn't sober me up. Something was telling me I was in trouble. But deep down inside I didn't care. My life didn't seem to mean that much to me anymore anyway, so what difference did it make that I had sunk to an all-time low - by being in "Middle Ground's" company.

All the cars pulled up to the big gate at the same time. Freddie stepped out of a shiny black Jaguar. Stuart stepped out of a bright red Ferrari. Tanner stepped out of a sparkling white Rolls-Royce. And once we got inside, Mark seated me on the long tan sofa, and everybody scattered throughout and I didn't see a soul for a few minutes. Then Mark stepped back into the room carrying two glasses and a bottle of Sutter Home.

"Let's go upstairs. We'll have more privacy there," Mark suggested with a big smile.

"But why do we need privacy? Right here in your living room is fine. I just want to drink my sorrows away. I don't need privacy to drink."

"No. Look Girl. Let's go upstairs. This place is going to be crawling with people in the next ten minutes. And besides, you look pretty tired. I think you should take a nap before the party starts," he suggested.

"Maybe you're right. I do feel pretty tired. I'll take a nap. Then I'll wake up and drink some more."

The moment we walked into his room, I headed straight to

the bed, took a seat and fell over on my back. I was completely out of it. I was his prey but somehow didn't even care.

He took a seat beside me and pulled me up to set beside him with his arm around me. "It's obvious that you have had quite a bit to drink. But I don't plan to have my way up here with you without your permission. Do you understand? Like I said before," he paused in my eyes, "You are one dangerous looking lady. God give me strength cause I want to get between your legs like crazy!"

I was sitting there with my eyes half open, somewhat wobbly as he placed one hand behind my back and one hand on my face, caressing my cheek, "You are some looker, "Is it okay if I kiss you, Maryann?" he asked in a sensuous whisper.

I just sat there in a daze, staring straight ahead, and he thought my silence meant yes. And maybe it did, because I didn't try to push him away. And with great ease he slid his tongue between my lips, grabbing my face with both hands, kissing me wild, moving his tongue tenderly inside of my mouth, "Girl, I love your mouth." He pulled away, kissing me ever so tenderly, repeatedly on the lips.

My body was turned on and that was for sure. But could I, would I go all the way with Mark Franklin? The booze and my body was saying yes. And my heart was saying no. But which one would win out? The booze and my body were two to one against my heart. But all of a sudden, my bladder took over.

"Wait. I need another drink and I need to use the bathroom," I said, rising from the bed.

"We have all we need to drink right here. See over on the dresser?" he pointed to the dresser.

"But where's the bathroom?" I asked.

"It's downstairs. The first door to the right after you enter the living room."

"Okay, I'll be right back," I said, rushing out of his room.

When I got downstairs, he was right, the place was crawling with people now. I went to the bathroom, but turned around when

five other females were waiting to use it. I grabbed my head, afraid of wetting my clothes. So I hurried toward the kitchen looking for another bathroom, and Freddie and Stuart were headed out of the doorway.

"Guys, can you please help me find a bathroom. I can't hold it," I begged, squeezing my legs together.

They exchanged looks, Stuart drained his beer bottle, took a final puff from his cigarette, dropping it in the bottle. "Follow us," Stuart suggested.

I followed them to what seemed like a hideaway back room off the kitchen. They showed me the bathroom and when I was finished, they weren't finished with me.

"What are you doing? Step aside and let me out of here," I asked, but they just stood there blocking the closed door, with their arms folded, smiling, giving me a sexy stare.

"Don't get your feathers ruffled. We're not up to anything. We just thought you might want another drink," Freddie asked.

"Yeah. That's it, Maryann. We figured you may want another drink," Stuart grinned, holding up a pint of whiskey to my face.

"I do want another drink," I shook my head. "But I can't drink that stuff. That would kill me. I don't have a stomach for hard liquor," I said.

"This isn't all we have in here," Stuart replied, looking at Freddie.

"He's right. I have two bottles of Sutter Home on ice in my fridge," Freddie answered.

I glanced around the large room, then back to them. "What's this? Your room, Freddie?" I asked.

"That's right. So what do you say? Should I go fetch one of those bottles of wine for you?" Freddie asked.

"No," I shook my head, "I don't have time to drink with you guys, sorry. Mark is waiting for me upstairs. He has lots to drink in his room too."

They glanced at each other and grinned. "So he does?" Freddie replied. "But you're better off staying here and having a drink with us, Miss Sexy legs."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because by now all of Mark's drink is gone," Stuart grinned, "Yeah, you get back up to his room and there's nothing there to drink," Stuart laughed.

"You're laughing. You guys are kidding. Mark's drink isn't gone. I might be drunk, but I'm not stupid. I know why you guys want me to stay here and drink your booze."

"Oh, do you Miss Sexy?" Freddie asked.

"Yes. I do. Because you guys are all sluts and you get off on having a pretty girl in your company," I said, staggering somewhat, looking dead in their eyes.

"And you know you're pretty, don't you Girl?" Freddie winked.

"Yes! I am pretty. I'm very pretty. Because Cooper said I was pretty. That's when I knew I was pretty. So now open the door and let my pretty ass out of here," I demanded, pointing my wobbly finger at them, barely standing up straight.

"You got it, Babe, since you put it like that," Freddie grinned, as they stepped aside pulling the door open.

But before I could step through the door, Freddie gathered me up in his arms, pushing his tongue down my throat, swallowing me up right quick, pulling away shaking his head, "I could get real used to kissing a Sweetie like you and never get enough!" Freddie licked his lips, then rolled me out of his arms to Stuart's, where Stuart held me close and kissed me hungrily, pulling away smiling, "Girl, your lips are on fire. Is everything this hot?" Stuart asked.

They were treating me like a dog sharing one piece of meat and I was too smashed to care. When Stuart released me and I staggered out of the room, I heard Freddie whistle, "You are one sexy lady."

When I got back to Mark's room, he was lying across the bed

asleep, wearing a silky white robe. But when I poured myself another glass of wine, he sat straight up, smiling. But I could see why he had fallen asleep, the bottle was almost empty. Freddie and Stuart were almost right, even though they were kidding around.

"Come here, Maryann. What took you so long? Sexy, I have something to ask you."

I took a seat beside him and he whispered in my ear, sounding somewhat smashed himself, "I know we have both had a lot to drink. You especially, and if it wasn't for the booze, I'm sure you wouldn't even be sitting here in my room. But all that aside. Do you want to fuck?"

His question was clear and to the point, and while I was giving it thought, my thought was interrupted by a loud knock on his bedroom door.

"Who is it?" he hollered, still seated.

"We're looking for Maryann. Is she in there?" Janet asked.

Mark looked at me, holding up one finger to cut off my response.

"Who wants to know?" he asked, quickly jumping off the bed, throwing on his shirt, then quickly stepping into his burgundy leather slacks.

"This is Janet and Jimmie. Is she in there?" Janet shouted from outside the door.

Mark glanced at me and winked while he was quickly buttoning his shirt. But from the expression on his face, he didn't seem too happy to have visitors at his door. But I was still seated on his bed, holding my cheeks, trying to get a grip.

"Who is Jimmie?" he asked.

"That's Janet's boyfriend," I mumbled, falling back on the bed.

"No, Girl. Sit up," he pulled me up, "Your friends are here. We want them to see you're okay, so they can get the hell on and we can get back to business. Wouldn't you like that pretty Girl? I can't wait to kiss you all over your beautiful body," he said, walking

across the room, pulling the door open.

Janet and Jimmie were standing there with ticked-off expressions on their faces.

"Well, Maryann. Do you have anything to say? Or do you just plan to sit there like a frog on a log?" Janet asked in a huffy voice, stepping across the room to face me.

"What do you mean? Leave me alone," I shouted up at her.

I was still seated on the bed as she had her arms folded standing over me with a mean look on her face.

"Leave me alone? What's with you?" Janet hollered. "I'm the one who should have the attitude! You left without me!"

"You knew where we had headed. So what's the problem?" I asked.

"Yes, Maryann. But we were supposed to leave together. I walk away to use the phone, get back and you're nowhere to be seen!"

"Well, you were on the phone and wanted us to leave without you."

"Yes! I was on the damn phone. But I told you I would be back in a few minutes," Janet argued.

"Whatever! Who cares! I'm a big girl! I don't need a babysitter. Okay? Now get off my back, and make yourself handy and pass me that bottle off the dresser. I need another drink," I said, pointing toward the half empty bottle of Sutter Home.

Janet glanced at Jimmie and made a rude gesture with her shoulders toward me, not attempting to pass me the wine. But Mark stepped over to the dresser, grabbed the bottle and my glass, bringing it over to me.

Jimmie shook his head, "Man. I don't think she needs anymore of that...."

"Is that right, Brother? Well, the Lady just asked for a drink, and as long as she's in my house and in my room as my guest, she gets what she asks for," Mark stated quite firmly.

"I see. We'll see about that," Jimmie looked at Janet and she

turned her head, apparently annoyed at my rudeness. Then he stepped over to the edge of Mark's king size bed, taking a seat beside me.

"Maryann. What are you doing? If you don't stop drinking that wine, you'll find yourself in some hospital getting your stomach pumped. Now give me that glass and let's get out of here."

I wasn't about to give him my glass, gripping it tighter, taking another sip.

"Because think about it Maryann. Would Cooper want you here?" he shook his head, "I don't think so. He had fallen out with this group." He paused and glanced over at Janet, who still had her arms folded and nose in the air.

"Come on and give me your glass so Janet and I can take you home," he tried to take my glass.

I jerked my glass back, splashing the wine on my clothes and Mark's fancy hunter green bedspread.

"See what you made me do? You silly fool! Get away from me! Please! Will you two just get lost," I rose off the bed fussing at him, but flopped right back down.

"Jimmie, let's go! Maryann is making a complete fool out of herself. She'll be sorry tomorrow! I'm sure!" Janet said sharply.

"I know she will if we leave her here," Jimmie uttered in an agitated tone.

"What you mean if? Can't you see, she's not coming with us. There's nothing more we can do! She doesn't want to leave!" Janet hollered at Jimmie.

"I know! But we got to try! She's messed up right now. I wouldn't feel right leaving her here. Would you?" Jimmie raised his voice back at Janet.

"No! I don't want to leave her here either. But you tell me, Jimmie Tyler. What are we supposed to do? Drag her out of here kicking and hollering by the hair? Like she's our kid! I don't think so! Maryann is a grown woman! And we can't make her do shit! And you know, I don't want to leave her here all drunk and stuff no

more than you do. But you heard her, she just told us to get lost. And she meant it!" Janet kept fussing at Jimmie.

"You damn right I meant it! So why don't you two go on and do whatever it is you do together, and get out of my hair."

They both stared a hole into me, and I waved bye-bye with both hands, "Now go on! Scram!"

Mark was standing over by the dresser, flashing me a smile every time I looked his way. Then Janet stepped over and took a seat beside me, patting my back.

"Maryann, I'm sorry about jumping down your throat about leaving me at Mother's. I was out of line to walk in here all huffy about that. So do you forgive me?" she asked meekly.

"Sure. I forgive you. There's no time for grudges. Just like I told Mark," I pointed to Mark, "Isn't he gorgeous? But he's not my Cooper," I laughed, standing to my feet. "Let's go downstairs. There's a party down there," I suggested.

Janet put her arm around my shoulder, "Sure. Let's go down there. Where's your purse?" she asked.

"I don't know. I won't need it down there. All their drinks are free."

"Here's her purse over here," Mark grabbed it from the nightstand, walking toward me.

He handed me the purse and gently gripped my arm, walking me to the opposite side of the room.

"Could you ask your friends to step out of the room for a moment? I need to speak to you in private for a moment. You never did answer my question, you know?"

I glanced around and Janet and Jimmie were standing near the door, looking on like two dogs waiting for a bone, beckoning me. And Mark was talking in a whisper, tenderly turning my face back to face him, lifting my chin as if he would kiss me. But he merely repeated himself.

"Did you hear what I just said? You never answered my question."

I gazed into his deep brown eyes, and I could see the same kind of burning desire that I used to see in Cooper's eyes for me.

"What question?" I asked.

He grinned at me and glanced quickly over at Janet and Jimmie, holding his voice to a mere mumble.

"You know what question. You know what we were talking about before those two over there showed up."

While gazing in his eyes, somewhat wobbly, it hit me what he meant and I blushed at the thought.

"Oh, that question," I giggled.

"So," he grinned and just stared in my eyes for a second.

"Do you have an answer for me?" he asked in a very low voice, making sure Jimmie and Janet didn't hear.

"I'm still thinking about it," I said in a whisper.

"Okay," he nodded. "But when you say you're still thinking about it, does that mean you may have an answer for me sometime tonight? Or what are we talking here? You wouldn't mean tomorrow or next week would you?" he asked in a whisper.

I smiled at him, "Oh, no. I don't mean tomorrow or next week. I mean after while," I answered in a low voice, grabbing his hand, leading him across the room.

"But right now I want to go downstairs and party. Let's go party Janet and Jimmie!" I shouted, as we stepped across the room where they stood.

Jimmie jerked open the door and we all headed downstairs. And it was plain to see that he and Janet had pissed expressions on their faces. And Janet was holding onto my arm, until I jerked it away, walking quickly ahead of her, but before we could all step into the living room, she had a hold of me again.

"I'll be right back. I got to use the john," Jimmie said in an agitated voice.

When Jimmie stepped away, Mark patted my shoulder.

"Can I get you ladies anything? I'm headed to the kitchen. I need a scotch on the rocks."

Janet shook her head. But I quickly replied, "Sure. I'll take the same."

"You got it, pretty girl. Two scotch on the rocks coming up."

As Janet and I stood near the front door, waiting for Mark and Jimmie, I got a whiff of some fresh, bold smelling expensive men's cologne. And I looked to my left and there stood Freddie standing right next to me, smiling.

"Having fun are we?" he grinned, passing me a sip of his drink.

I took a small swallow and passed it back to him, shaking my head and coughing. "Jesus! What are you drinking? That shit is nasty!" I giggled.

"I thought this might be a bit too rough for your blood," he held his glass out and looked at it. "This is what you call white lightening! Moonshine! Corn liquor!" he grinned.

"You mean whiskey, right?" I asked.

"Well, yes and no. But not the kind of whiskey you're thinking about. Cause what you're looking at here, sexy eyes," he kept holding out his glass, "Is what you can't buy in a liquor store. People make this shit illegally," he grinned looking dead in my eyes.

"One of my fans mailed a bottle to me from Tennessee, and I tell you...," he lost his thought and winked at me, touching my cheek, "Your radiant eyes amaze me. But as I was saying, all it takes is a couple shots and it knocks you on your ass fast. And believe it or not, but Stuart and I got our first sip of moonshine on the 4th of July back in 1976," he laughed. "We were both kids at the time. I was barely 12 and Stuart was barely 13. But that's a day we'll never forget. Because we both got our asses torn up for sneaking Grandma Fannie's white lightening outside."

For some reason that statement seemed very funny and I was laughing away, but I glanced at Janet who was standing beside me, and she was still frowning. And as Freddie touched my arm to try to get my attention again, she glanced at him, making a testy gesture

with her shoulders, throwing her head back in the air. I had never seen her so touchy. Something more had to be behind her rude behavior, other than just being upset because I was very tipsy and wouldn't leave the party.

Several things were running through my intoxicated head, maybe she was huffy because Jimmie was with her and she couldn't be her flirty self and end up in Tanner's, Freddie's, Mark's or Stuart's bed. Or maybe she was angry because even if he wasn't with her, none of them had given her the time of day. Or maybe she was testy because if I had waited for her, maybe things would have worked out a little bit more in her favor. She would have talked her way into one of their beds. Or maybe she was angry because I was being a complete jerk by not leaving with them. But I just didn't care. Things had changed and I didn't want to be a miss nice anymore. And bit by bit, since I had watched them lower Cooper in the ground and throw that dirt on him, I could feel my heart turning to stone.

"I can get you something else," Freddie smiled.

"No, that's okay. Mark is getting me something. But he seems to be taking a mighty long time. And I really need another drink - so I can stay like an open window, feeling no pain."

"Okay, I get it. Window pane. That's cool. But look, tell me what he's getting you. I'll get you the same thing. And what you want to bet - I don't get back with your drink in two minutes tops?"

"Okay. Sounds good to me. He's getting me one of those thingamajig? One of those fancy drinks. A, a...whatchamacallit?" I touched Janet's arm, and she threw me a stone cold look.

"What's he getting me?"

"Something your giddy ass sure enough don't need!" she snapped.

"Well! What's it called?"

"A damn scotch on the rocks, Maryann!" she almost bit off my head.

My head was spinning something awful and I halfway felt like I might pass out, but she still stepped on my nerves when she called me a giddy ass in front of Freddie. Freddie and I exchanged looks, and he was probably wondering what was her problem. But he merely threw up one finger and squinted his eyes at me in a sexy way as he started to step away.

"One scotch on the rocks coming up in no time flat. Wait right there."

I nodded okay as he disappeared in the crowd headed toward the kitchen. Then I turned to Janet and pointed to the opposite side of the room.

"Now, get your huffy, rude tail away from me! Go stand somewhere else. I'm serious, Janet. You got that frown on your face, acting testy and irritable. And you were downright rude - calling me giddy ass in front of Freddie."

"What difference does it make what I call you in front of Mr. Larson. You think they're all sluts anyway! But it seems mighty strange how you seem to love their attention!"

"What is that supposed to mean, Janet? Don't jump down my throat because they're not giving you any attention!"

"I didn't say I wanted their attention!"

"Yeah, right, Janet. We both know differently. You would give anything to be in one of their arms right now. Because you have said it on many occasions."

"So what, Maryann? Maybe I have. I have always been straightforward about how I feel about Freddie and them. I think they are all hot! And what girl wouldn't fantasize about being on their sheets. But wake up and smell the bacon! I happened to have half of a brain whether you know it or not. I'm not a big enough fool to allow myself to get screwed by one of them and kicked aside, and lose Jimmie in the process! Because we both know that's all they're after is a piece of ass! Right?"

"Whatever! Just don't say things like giddy ass, showing disrespect for me in front of people."

"Well! Gee Whiz! Maryann. I don't usually do that to you. Now do I? But when you make a fool out of yourself and get as plastered as you are right now, shit it happens!"

"Maybe it does. But watch your mouth, okay? I don't need you standing around like a stick in the mud - pouring cold water on my fun," I said, propping myself against that tall grandfather clock over in the corner near where I was standing, because my head was spinning like crazy and I was starting to feel more wobbly. My stamina was fading fast.

"What's wrong with you? About to fall or what?" Janet asked.

I didn't reply. But before I could brace myself good, Janet had grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the front door.

"What did you pull me out here for?" I asked crossly.

"Maryann, I don't give a damn if you ever speak to me again but I'm not letting you go back in there! Are you so smashed out of your head that you can't even see what's going on?" Janet screamed, giving me a mean look.

By now, Jimmie was stepping out the front door.

"So you got her out here? Now let's get her in the car," Jimmie suggested, glancing around."

"What took you so long?" Janet asked him.

"I went to use the john."

"And my question remains the same. What took you so long?"

"Janet, that line at the toilet door is what took me so long. You realize how many people there are trying to use that one bathroom?"

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that," she mumbled.

"I guess you hadn't. So are we finally ready here?"

I was taking in the fresh night air and it was somehow helping me to breathe a little easier.

The front lawn was packed with people enjoying their well-manicured exclusive grounds. There was as much racket going on on

the outside as there was on the inside. Two big stereo speakers were sitting outside to the left of the house near the patio area. And the volume was pumped up blasting a Stevie Wonder album. And no doubt the clear sky and nice hot weather contributed greatly to the crowd gathering outside.

I glanced across the yard to my left and noticed Tanner among the crowd, leaning against somebody's candy apple red BMW. He had two tall, shapely females keeping him company, and even though gossip had it that he and Cathy Thomas were an item, neither girl on his arm was Cathy Thomas. They were both playing in his hair and kissing him all over. And he was all smiles, as he stood there sharing a bottle of Sutter Home with them, with his blue shirt unbuttoned, showing his hard chest. One of the girls was rubbing his chest, then her hand slipped slightly beneath his belt. And he made a pleasing gesture as if she could keep her hand right where it was.

Seconds later, he glanced across the yard and did a double take when he spotted me, and as if he didn't already have his hands full, he made sexy gestures with his eyes and mouth at me, then flashed me a big smile and beckoned for me. But needless to say, the two females threw me dirty looks, pulling him further across the grounds. They were giggling and from the way he was caressing their shoulders and hips, he seemed very amused.

And as I stood there for a moment looking around, I had never seen so many people at a house party before. People were standing against the house, against the trees, against the fence, against the hedges and against some of the cars that were parked on the grounds. They had more people at their house party than Mother's had at their club. And gathering from the sharp cars, fancy attire and expensive jewelry people were sporting, their party was mainly catering to a wealthy clientele, probably other musicians and entertainers like them.

And I had never seen so much beer and wine, tubs of beer and tubs of wine sitting in the foyer. And as if the alcohol wasn't enough to get us all stoned out of our heads, I noticed several people

sitting on the grass putting marijuana into pipes and smoking, and some standing around puffing reefers. But to my surprise, not putting any activity past a "Middle Ground" gala, I didn't notice or see anyone flashing, snorting or sniffing any hard drugs like crack or cocaine.

Suddenly, while standing there looking around at the crowd, Jimmie gripped my left arm and Janet grabbed my right arm. But I jerked loose and grabbed my face and started crying.

"You guys are supposed to be my friends! But you're treating me like some kid. Have you ever stopped to think that I can take care of myself? Hell! No! Because if you had, you wouldn't be trying to drag me away from this party! When you know I'm not ready!"

Jimmie threw his white sox cap to the ground and hit his fist in his hand.

"Maryann! Maryann! Get a grip. Do you expect Janet and I to just drive home and leave you here in your condition?" he glanced around. "Especially in the hands of that horny ass fucker that's been sniffing up behind you!" he hollered in my face. "And as if he wasn't your only problem! You have a whole house of Casanova's in there!" he pointed toward the house.

I grabbed my ears, "Shut up! Shut up! Stop yelling at me!"

"Yelling is the only way to get through to you it seems!"

I pointed my finger in his face. "Forget you Jimmie! Who in the hell do you think you are anyway? You're not my damn keeper! Nobody is sniffing up behind me it seems but you and Janet! Now get your big loud mouth out of my face!" I shoved him in the chest with both hands.

He threw up both hands, shaking his head and turned his back to me, "Janet! You better talk to Maryann. Because it's like this! She can bitch and cry all she wants! But I'm taking her ass home with us if it's the last thing I do! Hell, I would feel less than a man if I left her here."

"Maryann. You know he's right. We don't plan to just leave

you here," she uttered in a calm voice.

"I can understand that Janet. But I'm ticked because you guys are trying to drag me away from here when I'm not ready yet. I want to dance and drink some more. I want to party. I promise I'll leave with you and Jimmie if you'll just stay here a little while longer."

"How much longer, Maryann? Long enough for Mark Franklin to drag you back upstairs and knock the bottom out of you?" Jimmie asked fuming.

Janet popped Jimmie up side the shoulder with a tight fist.

"Stop your damn screaming at her! And what's it to you if Mark Franklin did drag her upstairs?"

"Janet, how can you ask me some shit like that? You feel the same way I do, you don't want anyone taking advantage of her either while she's fucked up on all that booze!"

"I know, Jimmie. It's just that you seem a little bit too emotional about all of this," Janet snapped.

"Well, maybe so! And if I am! It's because I feel I owe it to Cooper to look out for her," he explained in a calmer voice, reaching down to pick up his cap.

"Cooper is dead! You hear me! He's stone cold! And he's not coming back. You hear me, Jimmie? He's not coming back! So what difference does it make what happens to me? I don't give a damn! Do you two hear me? I don't care!"

Janet grabbed my shoulders and shook me.

"Well! We give a damn, Maryann! And that's that. I have gotten pissed now. So just shut the bull and let's get the hell out of here! Mrs. Brooks knows I picked you up and promised you a good time, and I will be damned to face her knowing I left you stranded, high as a kite, smashed out of your head!"

"But I said I wasn't ready yet. Let's hang out here just a little while longer," I glanced from Janet to Jimmie.

He shook his head, staring me in the eyes, "Maryann," he said in a humble voice. "You're not ready to leave right now

because you're not thinking straight. Really, you're not. And for Heaven's sake, Girl, you got to cut us some slack here for caring about you. You're wasted for the first time in your life. I have never known you to drink more than two glasses of wine. But Janet told me you had downed four glasses before 10:00 p.m. And only God knows how many more after that! That's why we're looking out for you, Girl, trying to get you home. Can't you understand that?"

I was tired of the hassle and nodded, "Yes."

As they were both walking me quickly by each arm, I heard Mark holler, "You're leaving Maryann? The night is still young. And the party has just started to rock. What's your rush?"

I glanced over my shoulder as we had almost made it to Jimmie's vehicle and jerked loose from them and started walking back toward Mark. But as he headed toward me, within a flash, Jimmie had met him head on, catching him off guard, placing a hard fist right to Mark's stomach.

"You horny ass Brad Pitt looking son-of-a-bitch! This is one piece of ass you won't get tonight! You hear me Mr. Franklin? Take this!" Jimmie socked him a second time in the stomach.

Mark and all of "Middle Ground" were in good physical shape, working out daily, just like Cooper used to do. And Cooper used to belong to the same workout club with them. And even in my drunken stage, I still couldn't believe cowardly Jimmie, who was all talk, was taking on Mark. And by now, Mark was extremely angry, and before I could blink, he had flattened Jimmie on the driveway with one forceful blow to the right of his chin, and right back with another powerful strike to the left rib cage.

"Next time you think about being a Johnny-on-the-spot, think long and hard! You can get a serious ass whipping sticking your damn nose in other people's affairs!" Marked yelled angrily.

Jimmie dropped to the ground on his knees, but was up in Mark's face in a flash, throwing a roaring fist to Mark's chest. Mark staggered slightly.

"So, you still haven't had enough! I was hoping you

wouldn't make me get my silk shirt dirty!" Mark frowned, coming back with a hard sock to Jimmie's nose, and blood gushed everywhere, even on Mark's expensive looking grey silk shirt. And as Jimmie tried to wipe the blood away, Mark rammed a tight fist forcefully to Jimmie's stomach, and Jimmie was hurting bad by now.

Somehow, seeing that fight sobered me up. It brought to mind the fight Mark and Cooper had in my yard. I grabbed my ears.

"Stop it! Stop it! Please stop!" I screamed.

Mark stepped over to me, pulling a white handkerchief from his pant pocket, wiping Jimmie's blood from his hands, noticing the blood on his shirt, shaking his head. Then I stood there and watched as he unbuttoned his shirt, slipped it off and crumpled it in a ball, then he put his arm around my shoulder.

"It's over, Baby. I'm sure your friend has had enough." He glanced over at Jimmie who was wiping the blood from his nose with his shirt sleeve. "Let's head back inside to the party," Mark suggested in a whisper.

I pulled away from him. My head was a bit clearer, but still spinning. "No! This is wrong! I don't like you! I don't like any of you bastards! You swindled Cooper out of his contract!"

"Come on, Baby. We were getting along so well before your friends showed up."

I grabbed my ears, "No! You did Cooper wrong! You double-crossed him! You liar!" I hollered.

"Okay. So it's like this again! Here we go with the same old shit! I'm out of here, Babe!" he strutted back toward the big house.

As he headed up the walkway toward his house, I glanced over at Janet who rolled her eyes at me with disgust as she was wiping the blood from Jimmie's nose with a Kleenex. And blood was splattered on his yellow shirt.

Janet and Jimmie weren't happy with me to say the least, but got me home safe and sound and by 3:00 a.m. I ended up in my own comfortable bed all tucked in under the covers.

Chapter Nine

By late September, which was exactly three months after that party fiasco, Janet wasn't satisfied until she talked me into setting her up with Stuart. She begged me to get him to come over to my house on the weekend when my parents and Paul had driven down to Columbus, Georgia for a few days to visit Grandma Helen. And in order to get Stuart to talk to Janet, I had to sweet talk Freddie and promise him the world. And in return, even though Janet wasn't Stuart's type, Freddie had told me come hell or high water, he would drag him to my door that Friday night to see Janet whether he wanted to or not. And Janet was in my living room anxiously awaiting Stuart.

She had been peeking out of the window every few minutes, glancing back and forth at her watch and the clock over the fireplace.

"Didn't Freddie say they would be here by 8:00 o'clock?" she asked.

"Yes. That's what he said, but look at the time, it's only five after. They'll be here. Just calm down and take it easy."

"I can't, Maryann. I just can't. I can't believe I'm getting this fabulous opportunity to spend some time with this incredible gorgeous man. How did you make this happen?"

I shrugged my shoulders, "Well, you kept begging me to get him over here for you," I said, taking a seat on the sofa.

"Janet, I just hope you know what you are doing? And just hope you are not illusional about this whole situation. So take a seat beside me and let's discuss this thing once more. Because I'm right in the middle here. And I don't want any hard feelings coming my way because of any misconceptions," I patted the cushion next to me. But she didn't sit. She kept standing.

"I can't sit down, Maryann. I'm too nervous. Too anxious."

"Well, you don't have to sit, but are you clear about what's getting ready to take place here? Because if you're not, you better say so, so I can tell you before they pull up."

"Yeah, I know the real story. I'm a big girl. I can handle it. It goes like this, I have the hots for Stuart, and he doesn't have the hots for me. But Freddie, his brother, who's sweet on you, talked Stuart into coming over to spend some time with me as a favor to you. And even though Stuart wasn't that in to the idea, because of my short hair and big ass, since they go for girls with long hair and neat figures, he decided to come anyway just for a piece of ass," she explained with a straight face.

"Janet, are you okay with this?"

"How can you just sell yourself that short? How can you be so all into this man that you're willing to jump in bed with him and let him use you like you're dirt and not worth anything else? I don't know if I can let you do this. It just doesn't sound right."

"Maryann, shut up, okay. This is my choice and my life. This is something I want to do. This is a fantasy that I have always had. I have fantasized being with one of "Middle Ground" since I first laid eyes on them. And you know, most people don't get the opportunity to live their fantasies. Well, tonight I will damn sure live mine."

"But what about Jimmie? He's your boyfriend, you know. And sleeping with another man is called two-timing. How would you feel if he did that to you?"

"Look, I don't want to talk about Jimmie. I'm not happy with him anyway. Plus he's probably already two-timed me anyway. He damn sure got somebody else on his mind."

"I don't know, Janet. How are you going to feel about all of this tomorrow? I just don't want you to throw any of this stuff up in my face if it all backfires on you."

"I know, Sweetie. Don't worry, I'll be grateful to you forever for doing me this favor."

"Well, you know I'll do anything for you," I smiled at her as she finally took a seat on the magazine bench over by the window.

"So how do I look, Maryann?"

"You look just fine."

"Oh, good. I hope Stuart likes this red mini I'm wearing."

"I'm sure he will. They like short skirts."

"Yeah, I know, but will he like a short skirt on me?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I couldn't answer that.

"Well, Maryann," she snickered, "I tell you like this, he may not like my short skirt, but I'm going to damn sure make sure he likes what's under it. I'm going to body slam his brains out! And by the time I finish laying this hot stuff on him, who knows, he might want some more. And believe me, some more he can have."

"Girl, you are so crazy," I laughed.

"But wait a minute, Janet. What do you mean, you'll give him some more? You're not hoping for a relationship...."

She cut me off, "Oh, no. Not a boyfriend, girlfriend relationship. But who knows," she winked at me.

"Maybe we'll get a heavy sexual relationship going," she kept grinning.

"Well, whatever. I just wanted to make sure you weren't hoping for a relationship with this guy. Cause we both know that's not going to happen," I said quite seriously.

She kept looking over at me and patting her hair and clothes, acting more excited than I had ever seen her.

"And, Janet, I know you're all excited and everything and

this is your big fantasy as you say, and I hate to say this, but he doesn't even want to be with you. Freddie had to twist his arm to get him to even come over to sleep with you. And he told Freddie he didn't plan to deep kiss you, just a straight roll in the hay and nothing more," I explained.

Her smile faded and her eyes showed a tinge of sadness.

"Gee, Maryann. That's a downer. I was hoping to get tongued by him. Well, leave it to me, there will be kissing," she rubbed her hands, grinning from ear to ear.

"Wish you would just forget this thing and tell Stuart where he can go, and not belittle yourself like this for some guy," I uttered with no pep to my voice. But she just ignored me and started peeking out of the window again.

"Oh, by-the-way, Maryann. What do you think of Freddie. He is some gorgeous too, don't you think?" she glanced over her shoulder at me, still peeking out of the window.

"I think about as much of him as I do the rest of them. And yeah, he's fine. They all are. But I can't seem to get over how they swindled Cooper out of his contract. And even if it didn't go down quite the way I think, I'm just not interested in anybody it seems. And I guess you can tell and sense I'm not happy. And Janet, I'm starting to think I'll never be. I miss Cooper so much! I'm still yearning for a dead man! I loved him so much, Janet! And now he's gone!"

"I know, Maryann. But you got to let go of all that sadness and try to love again. Cause it's been almost a year since Cooper's death," she explained sincerely.

By 8:30 sharp, she pulled the curtains apart again, looking out.

"I see a car pulling in. It's a black Jaguar. I think it's Freddie and him. It is them!" she closed the curtains, grabbing her head. "They're here! They're here! How do I look? Am I wearing enough lipstick? Is my face shiny? Tell me, tell me!"

"Janet, calm down. You look fine. And remember, you

don't have to go through with this. You can always say no," I patted her shoulder as I opened the door.

There they stood, looking sinfully handsome, and sharp as ever, wearing silk outfits. Freddie's was black and Stuart's was grey, sporting their expensive rings and sharp shiny lizard skin boots. And as they stepped into the living room all smiles, Stuart took Janet's hand and they stepped into a corner speaking very low as I offered Freddie a seat on the twin sofas and took a seat on the one facing him.

I had told Janet they could use my room and in no time flat, she led him that way. And I was nervous and didn't know what to say to Freddie, and he probably was finding me very boring, because the last time I had been in his company, I was very talkative and giggly. But I was drunk. But now that I was sober, my reserved shyness would probably turn him off. Not that I cared.

But nothing turned him off and he hopped over on the sofa next to me pretty fast after Janet and Stuart shut the door to my room.

He sat beside me and without saying one word, gently took both hands and held my face toward his.

"Looking into your beautiful, sexy eyes that amaze me so, I can see great sadness. And I wish you would let me ease some of that sadness for you," he spoke so sensuously, placing his soft lips against mine very gently, and when I didn't push him away, he pushed his soft tongue between my lips and swallowed me up desperately, in a way I had craved. In a way I had ached for. In a way I had longed for. Just like Cooper used to kiss me.

He held my face so gently and kissed me so tenderly as if I were precious china, and before I knew it, I had wrapped my arms around him, totally enjoying his kisses. And as he placed me back on the sofa, something hit me and said, "How can you kiss this man and enjoy it after how they treated cooper," then I quickly shoved him away.

"I'm sorry, Freddie. I can't do this."

"Do what? We're not doing anything. I just wanted to kiss you, and I thought you wanted me to," he gazed in my eyes smiling. "I'm sorry if I stepped out of line. That was not my intention," he touched my cheek.

"Hey, let me ask you something," he asked quite seriously.

I gazed into his eyes and there was something about him that excited me. For one, I loved the way he smelled and he dressed a lot like Cooper. Plus he seemed to have a gentleness like Cooper.

"What you want to ask me?"

"Are you seeing anyone, Maryann?"

I shook my head in his sensuous eyes and he smiled.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. And I was just wondering would you like to go out with me sometime?"

I wanted to say yes. I wanted someone in my life. But I knew I would only be a piece of meat to him and nothing more. Cause he certainly didn't want me as a girl friend, and that's what I wanted to be, somebody's girl friend or nothing at all. But their reputation was crystal clear. They didn't have girl friends, only dates and as many women as they wanted. And besides that, I couldn't stop thinking about Cooper and I couldn't stop thinking about how they treated him. And the word that slipped through my lips was - no."

"I wish you would reconsider. You seem like the kind of woman I would love to have in my life."

"What do you mean about that Freddie? Don't you mean in your bed? I'm not looking to be somebody's sex slave. Cooper didn't treat me like that."

"Girl, who said anything about getting you in bed? I just want to take your fine ass out," he grinned.

"Come on, Freddie! I remember what you said about Stuart and all he wanted from Janet!" I pointed down the hall toward my bedroom.

"He is a slut! You are a slut! And Mark and Tanner are too! So tell me? Why should I buy into any of your lines? Just so you

can get me in bed and then mark me off your list?" I spoke in a huffy voice.

He was smiling and nodding his head.

"Pretty Girl. You are right. We are all sluts and I have yet to run into a dude who isn't. But the bottom line is this, slut or no slut, we are human. And there is a thing called love. And sluts can fall in love too, you know," he rubbed his chin gazing into my eyes. And I couldn't seem to take my eyes off of him.

"Let me ask you something else, Maryann."

"Okay," I mumbled.

"You knew Cooper loved you, didn't you?"

"Yes, he did."

"Okay, there you go. That's my point. He was a slut before he fell in love with you. He just lusted after other women in his head, and saved all his loving for you."

"You're lying. Cooper was never a slut, okay?"

"Maryann. Believe me, he was. And I'm not trying to say this to upset you, but I'm trying to make a point. Cooper and I were pretty tight before the falling out. And if he was alive today, he would tell you how I never believed in that damn clause that Mark rigged. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that Cooper told me how he had more females than he could chase before he fell in love with you. You stole his heart."

"Well, I guess that doesn't matter, because when we started going together, there was never a moment that I felt unloved, unwanted, or not cherished," I explained in his eyes.

He caressed my chin, and his touch sent heat ripping through me. My face warmed and I wanted him to kiss me again. But he merely gazed at me in a very admiring way.

"So, Maryann. You were right about calling us sluts. But if you gave me a chance, there's no doubt in my mind that you would be the one to steal my heart," he kept gazing at me and I inched my face just a little bit closer, and before I could blink, he got the signal and grabbed my face urgently, swallowing me up once more,

massaging his fingers in my hair. And as my heart began to race as I felt warm all over, the doorbell rang.

We quickly released each other, and I walked across the room to answer the door, pulling it open to Jimmie's face. And he stepped right in with an angry look on his face.

"Where is she?" he yelled sharply.

I thought I would choke from his confrontation. I hadn't expected him to show up, period, and especially while Janet and Stuart were still back there in my bedroom. I stood there motionless and speechless just staring in his face, and Freddie stood up with his well-built frame and stood beside me, placing his arm around me and that gave me the strength to talk.

"She's not here," I lied with my fingers crossed.

"You're lying, Maryann! She is here! I knew something was up when she canceled our date this evening. But she wouldn't tell me what. So I did something I have never done before, I parked down the street and watched her get out of a taxi in front of your house. Now answer me? Why couldn't she have driven those five blocks? She didn't drive them because she didn't want me to see her car. I know she's in here, Maryann! And I know she's in here with someone! Because when he pulled up I was over at Aunt Rosemary's and Uncle Allen's looking out of the window and I saw two men walk in here!" he roared.

He had caught me in a lie.

"Okay! You're right! She is here! But, Jimmie, I swear to you, if you try to start anything, I'm calling the cops! You and Janet will just have to handle this problem away from my house, okay?"

"Well, if she's here, where is she? Back in one of those rooms screwing?" he yelled angrily with water in his eyes.

"That damn whore! I saw the signs!"

"I guess you did see the signs when you stopped paying her any attention! Now get out, Jimmie, before I call the cops!"

"Don't worry! I'm leaving!" he jerked the door open.

"But you can tell that tramp that her ass is mine! You hear

me, Maryann! No bitch is going to screw around in my face and get away with it!" he stormed out of the door.

By 10:00 p.m., around 30 minutes after Jimmie had stormed out, Freddie and I were still gazing into each other's eyes, but we didn't kiss anymore, Janet and Stuart stepped out of my room all smiles. Stuart threw me a smile and beckoned for Freddie. Freddie hopped up and I walked them to the door, and as they stepped outside, he winked at me as he headed across the porch and down the steps, shaking his head.

"Got damn! You're gorgeous," he made a kissing gesture with his mouth.

"Think about what I said, okay? I still want to take you out. Is it okay if I give you a ring tomorrow?" he asked, standing at the driver's door.

After the longest pause, I shook my head.

"No. Let me think about it. I'll call you, okay?"

"Okay, Pretty Girl. Just don't keep me waiting too long."

The moment they pulled off, Janet started screaming.

"Maryann! Maryann! I'm in heaven! That rumor was right! He is equipped with a hot body that won't wait," she paused, grabbing her face. "And oh, by-the-way, your bed is a big mess in there. Because he's a wild, passionate lover, turned me every which way and then some. He tore me up in there," she laughed. "And from the moans he was making, I was laying it on his good looking ass but good. Girl, I'm in love."

"You're in love? Come down Janet. We both know what just happened was a one night stand. He's not going to jump in the sack with you anymore."

"Maryann, I know that. I'm just in love with the thrill he gave me. That man made me feel more complete and fulfilled than I have ever felt."

While she was going on and on, it hit me.

"Ah, shoot! Janet! Jimmie came here. He knows about your little liaison with Stuart. I tried to lie for you, but it was no use. He

saw you both walk through my door. And I got to tell you, I didn't like being put on the spot like that since you both are my friends."

Her big grin faded and she squeezed both hands together.

"Oh, shit! He does! That sneaky bastard! Well, too bad. I feel too damn good to let him get to me right now. I have just lived my fantasy, lying beneath that stiff, well-built hunk. And Freddie was right about what he told you. Stuart didn't kiss me on the mouth, but he kissed me heavily so, where it counts. And I kissed him back, exactly where it counted for him."

I grabbed my mouth.

"Why are you grabbing your mouth and looking all so surprised for? Men love it as much as we do. And just in case you're confused, I mean they love licking between our legs as much as we love being licked. And they love being kissed on their body as much as we love being kissed on ours...."

Her words were interrupted by the loud ding-dong. I rushed across the floor and pulled the curtains apart and it was Jimmie. He had shown up no more than ten minutes after Stuart and Freddie pulled away.

I glanced at Janet who was seated on the sofa still smiling.

"Let him in, Maryann."

I pulled the door open and he ripped inside.

"You lying tramp! I know you just finished screwing around with Stuart Larson. I just saw them pull up the road!" he walked over and pulled Janet up off the sofa.

"So what do you have to say for yourself? I'm through with you, bitch! I should slap that smirk off your face."

"But we both know you're not ready to go to jail! So, Jimmie, just get out of my face, okay? For months now, you haven't given me the time of day. And the first time somebody shows me some attention, you trip out! And it's fine by me if you want to call it quits! Because I'm not happy with your busted ass anyway! You don't want shit! And never gonna have shit!" she hollered in his face.

"And I guess you're fooling yourself thinking that big time lady killer, rock star wants the likes of you? Believe me, girls like you come a dime a dozen to guys like him! So Janet Nelson, you can just stop dreaming about that rich man - that you're hoping to drop on your doorstep - if you're hoping it's going to be Stuart Larson! Always on my ass about not having the kind of money you're looking for! Well, you can keep looking, Sister! See if I give a damn!" he was yelling so loud and angry until I thought he was going to start foaming at the mouth."

"Jimmie, I meant what I said! I will live in the lap of luxury some day! But I know it won't happen if I stay with your poor ass!" she hollered in his face.

"Janet! If you don't stop hollering at me - I will find myself in a jail cell tonight," he paused and hit his fist in his hand, glancing over at me.

"But come to think of it, you're not worth it! We're splitsville as of tonight! And see if I look back," he roared storming out of the door.

Time went on, and Jimmie and Janet did not go back on their words. She was finished with him and he was finished with her. And on many occasions, I thought about calling Freddie, but feelings of being disloyal to Cooper wouldn't allow me to dial his number.

Chapter Ten

Almost five Christmas' had come and gone since my precious Cooper departed his life. It was now October, 1990, and I was still trying to heal.

Walking in the woods behind the house, each step I took made the dry leaves crackle beneath my feet. The cool morning autumn air felt refreshing against my face. Walking alone in the peaceful woods always made me feel closer to Cooper. Taking an early morning walk deep into the woods, past the clear running creek was one of my regular morning routines after breakfast, since Cooper's death. My parents didn't want me walking alone or too far, and every morning as I headed out the back door, Mama would make the same concerned remark, "Maryann, you know you shouldn't be walking in those woods by yourself." But I wasn't afraid of what may be lurking in the bushes. That didn't bother me. The only thing that bothered me was having Cooper striped away from his life and my world, before we had a chance to grow old together.

I leaned up against a tall tree that was bare with leaves and

closed my eyes. I could see his beautiful face in my mind, then I could feel my tears flowing once more. I reached into my jeans pocket and pulled out the 4 x 4 piece of white paper that the first poem he wrote me was written. It was my first poem from him, which he had given to me on our third date. A special, simple note with a powerful message. A constant reminder of the special love and special bond that we shared.

"'A Fire Inside Of My Heart'

You are my radiant, shining light
In a world that is filled with darkness
Like a fire inside of my heart
That will continue to burn
Through all the rain and every storm."

After reading his poem, I dropped down to my knees and sat on the damp, cold grass, looking up at the big clear endless sky, reaching out both arms.

"Cooper, I know they say time heals all wounds. But please look down from the peaceful, beautiful heavens and look deep into my sad, wet, confused eyes. And you'll see a young woman whose wounds are still fresh.

It's been five long, miserable, deeply sad years and I keep hoping! And I keep praying! And I keep wishing! For this dark veil to lift and some happiness to shine in. And I guess I should tell you. I did consider going out with Freddie, because he is positively the only man who has ever made me feel like, maybe, I might give my heart to another. But you know what? I never would allow myself to go out with him, because I can't seem to rid myself of these sad, guilty feelings. And you know what else, my precious Cooper? Five years seem like five days in my mind. Your kiss is still on my lips. And I dream about you every night. And every

dream is the same. I actually look forward to my dreams, because they bring you to me. And each dream is identical. We laugh and we joke just like old times. And we kiss and I'm in your arms all through the night.

You enter my room through my bedroom window, and it always seems so real. And it seems like it's at night, but it's really the middle of the day, because my room is filled with bright sunshine glowing through my window. The wind is high, and then it calms, and the air is fresh and warm and filled with the clean fresh scent of white roses.

You walk toward my bed where I lie, smiling and unbuttoning your favorite hunter-green shirt, you throw your shirt on the floor and pull the rubber band from your hair and I watch you as your long dreadlocks sweep down your back.

You step to my bedside and cup my chin in your warm silky-smooth hands, then you drop to your knees and whisper against my face in a low, sexy voice, "I need you, Maryann."

You stare deep into my water filled eyes, and I'm always crying, because I'm so happy. And as you gaze into my eyes, you lean over and kiss me on the nose, then with one strong pull of the hand, you have me out of bed and up in your well-built arms. You bring your sweet mouth down on mine - and your warm, moist lips feel like slippery satin against mine. And I always say to you, "I love you, Cooper Valentine. Please make love to me."

And as I gaze up into your sparkling eyes, you grin and grab my face with both hands - looking down into my eyes, and you say, "I love you Maryann Brooks. There is just something about you that I simply adore. I get lost in your eyes," you whisper, grabbing my shoulders forcefully - yet gentle and kissing me again, but this time more hungrily.

I can feel your desire grow as you hold me tightly in your arms. And I love the feel of your tongue trailing over the outline of my mouth and then sliding inside of my trembling, awaiting lips. And as you kiss me deep and hungrily, my desire sizzles beneath my

skin. And shortly after that, we are both totally undressed and wrapped in each other's arms - rolling around on my queen-size bed. And the feel of your silky-smooth body against mine is breathtaking. And your touch is tender and gentle and it makes my heart race continuously in my chest.

Your hands caress my bosom as you smooth your face across them both, then your hands slowly trail a path down my stomach and between my thighs. And your electrifying touch makes heat rip beneath my skin wherever you touch me. By now, I want you to take me and make me yours completely. But each time a chill rushes through me, as I wonder will you say we have to wait. But there is no waiting in this dream - with tender gentle patience, you penetrate me. When I stiffened beneath you, experiencing slight pain - you comfort me with sweet, tender kisses.

You never stop kissing me and you never stop touching me. And there are no words to describe the joy and pleasure we are experiencing.

PART TWO: **A HEART OF STONE**

Chapter Eleven

It was now mid-December, 1990, the night of the big engagement party that Troy's parents were throwing for us. It had been the talk of the whole community. I had met Troy on the 96th floor of the John Hancock building, where Janet and I would frequent on weekends. He was taken with me and asked me out just minutes after I imposed myself into his company, after Janet informed me that he was the Troy Lake, of Lake Enterprises, the son of one of the wealthiest men in Chicago. Our engagement and wedding were making headlines all over the Windy City. And to say the least, I was fascinated by all the recognition that was coming my way. I was considered the pillar of the community, and Troy Lake, the wealthy Irishman was giving me all my heart desired on a silver platter. I was determined that if I couldn't be happy, I could at least be rich. I would be second only to the first lady of Chicago. All the newspapers read:

"Young lawyer/tycoon, Troy Lake, age 32, son of Mitchell and Monica Lake to wed Maryann Brooks, age 23, daughter of David and Rose Brooks. The special day is set for Saturday, December 29th."

It was a snowy, cold night, windy with blowing snow covering the ground. And from the bright light of the backyard light - pole, while sitting there on my bed - looking through the big picture window, I could see long icicles hanging from the big pear tree near my bedroom window; and in a distance, right past the storage house was my favorite little duck pond, covered by a solid sheet of ice. Sitting there on the edge of my bed, I had suddenly become unglued, no longer cool and composed about the party, but beside myself with anxiousness, until I could feel the bed shake beneath me. I was sitting there staring at the clock on the wall, dressed in my beautiful ankle-length, pale blue satin and white lace dress that Mama had made for me, and she had styled my thick black hair in fancy French curls hanging loosely on my shoulders with a soft blue satin ribbon wrapped around them. And even though I was dressed fancy and refined, like never before, I was sitting there uncontrollable, biting my perfectly manicured nails.

Troy would be arriving at any time. I was praying I would fit into his circle and that his wealthy, high-class friends would like me and embrace me into their world.

Planning our wedding for the 800 plus guests that would be attending had become a full-time job for me. I didn't miss resigning from the medical center, plus Troy was giving me everything I wanted on a silver platter.

Lying in my lap was the invitation which was printed in pure 24-kt. gold:

Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell Lake
and
Mr. and Mrs. David Brooks
cordially invite you to come
and celebrate
the engagement of their
son and daughter
Troy Lake
and
Maryann Brooks
On Saturday, December 15, at 7 pm
at the Lake Estate on Ashley Road
Chicago, Illinois

Troy picked us up around 6:00, which I thought would be plenty of time before everyone else arrived, but when we pulled into his long, elegant tree-lined driveway, I could see cars parked along the road a mile away. My eyes widened with surprise.

Troy turned off the engine, looked at me and smiled. Mama and Dad pushed open their doors and stepped out of the car, making their way through the snow and fighting the icy wind, as they walked across the huge yard. Troy and I were still sitting in his sparkling white Lincoln. We looked at each other and smiled.

"Maryann, you seem really nervous. You don't have to be. The only thing you have to remember is how much I love and adore you. Having you in my life, and soon to be my wife has fulfilled all my wishes," he said.

I could hear him, but my mind wasn't focused on what he was saying. I was looking down at the white rose he had given me. It was a lovely rose. My favorite flower. But it wasn't from Cooper. Then he touched my cheek, and suddenly he had my full attention.

"And it might sound sort of silly, but now when I get out of bed every morning, I feel more content and happier than I have ever

felt. Loving you, Maryann is a continuous high. It's like being told over and over that you have hit the lottery." He touched my hand, and by now my eyes were gazing into his, as he leaned over and kissed my lips.

We could hear the laughter and the music from their 24-room mansion. It appeared to have hundreds of windows, and that each one was lit up.

He pointed through the windshield and grinned. "It sounds like they are having fun. Are you about ready to go inside?" he asked.

"If you are," I answered, indifferently with no excitement or sparkle in my voice.

He touched my face, "I think you'll feel pretty comfortable around my family and friends. I know there is a saying that the rich think they are it, and everyone else is that. But I wasn't raised that way. And my parents weren't raised that way. We have money, yes, and we live well, yes. But my parents were not born with silver spoons in their mouths. They earned their wealth. They worked very hard to achieve what they have. And I'm doing the same...."

His words were cut off when we noticed the double front doors swing open. A man stood there and looked out toward us, and after just a couple of seconds, pulled his head back in and closed the doors.

I turned to Troy and smiled, and he grabbed my hand.

"Who was that, I wonder?" I guess they are all wondering what's taking us so long," I said and glanced at his watch.

"That was probably Dad, maybe. I think we should head inside," he suggested.

I inhaled sharply and grabbed at my stomach, and he leaned over and kissed the side of my face. And soon we headed across his big yard to the front door.

We walked through the door arm-in-arm, his parents rushed over to greet us. And some middle-aged Japanese woman in a white uniform walked over and took our coats. Troy placed our coats

across the short woman's arm, and placed his arm around my waist close to his side. He was looking very handsome in his three-piece beige suit.

I was thinking how warm and comfortable it was inside compared to the snow storm outside. And as I was looking around at all the hundreds of guests in attendance, it soothed me to see all the familiar, friendly faces. And the first smiling faces across the room that I spotted were Janet and her Dad, Mr. Nelson and her little sister, Pam, along with many friends from church and college. Then I spotted my little brother, who looked very mature, with a couple of his friends. But suddenly, I did a double take, cause it took me by surprise when I glanced across their huge, elegant living room and noticed Jimmie Tyler walking toward Mama and Dad. He was not invited and not expected. My temperature slightly rose from his presence, which made me very uneasy. I figured he wouldn't attend, since he was so against my marrying Troy.

Before we could all reach the middle of the room, tons of guests had mobbed us. They had all gathered around reaching to shake our hands. After greeting us and shaking hands, everybody just sort of mingled and didn't crowd us anymore. And just when I thought I could relax and catch my breath, a little old lady with short gray hair, using a walking cane, made her way across the room to us.

"Sweetheart, this is a client of mine, Mrs. Lily Black," said Troy.

I kept myself from laughing - but no harm intended. But she was noticeably pale, and I thought to myself, "You're more like Lily White."

"I'm pleased to meet you Mrs. Black," I said with a smile, reaching my hand out to the little old lady.

"Same to you dear. She is a very lovely girl, Troy," she said shaking my hand.

"Yes, I know," he said and touched my cheek.

Troy turned to me and kissed me on the forehead as Mrs. Black kept standing there.

"So, Maryann, dear, what field of law do you specialize in?" the old lady asked, in an arrogant manner.

Her question caught me by surprise and I looked at Troy, who spoke before I could utter a word.

"She's not a lawyer. One lawyer in this family will be plenty," Troy quickly uttered.

"She has no job?" asked Mrs. Black.

"Well, not yet at least, but I'm looking," I grinned.

Mrs. Black's eyes widened as she seemed surprised that I was in the unemployment line.

Before I could say another word, she merely turned her back to us and somewhat in a discreet manner made herself scarce from our company. Troy looked at me, smiled and shook his head.

"It's okay. Don't worry," he whispered, bending to kiss the side of my head.

He pulled me close to his side and tightened his left arm around my waist, as his father and some short, heavy man walked past us.

"So, this is the young beautiful maiden that Troy will take as his wife? She is lovely. I wish you kids the best."

"Thank you, Mr. Moore," said Troy.

The evening was wearing on and the moment Troy stepped away, Jimmie made his way across the room to the refreshment table where I was standing. He smiled at me disappointedly and I swallowed hard, knowing I didn't want to hear what he had to say.

"Girl, you don't belong here. You know you don't. You don't fit in this damn crowd any more than I do. And no more than your parents. Take a look over there at your folks," he points across the room. "They are seated over in that corner on that long fancy bench all by themselves, not talking or mingling with anyone and no one has bothered to mingle with them. Just take a look over there. Do you see any of these big wigs giving your parents the time of day?"

I crossed my eyes at him and snapped, "Jimmie, just shut up

and leave. I don't need you to tell me to look over there at Mama and Dad. Cause they are two adults - free to do whatever they choose. And if they want to sit over there in that corner like two frogs on a log - then that's their business."

"Okay, girl, be smart if you want. But you had better come to your senses, Maryann. Open your eyes and look around this room. Just look at all these bigots. Do you think one of them cares about who you are and where you're from? No! They do not! They only care about who Troy is and what his family stands for, which is their bucks. Do you honestly think any of them really gives a damn about you? Word is," he paused and grabbed a glass of champagne off the refreshment table. "That your heart turned to stone five years ago when cousin, Cooper, committed suicide. I guess this is your way of punishing yourself - giving up true love for material wealth!" he spoke angrily, turning his glass to his lips, draining the glass, then quickly placing the empty glass back on the table, beckoning for another servant.

"What is your problem, Jimmie? You either shut up or hit the door! I'm not interested in what you have to say. Besides, who invited you here anyway?" I snapped.

"Nobody invited me. I didn't need an invitation to come to this rag! Maryann! There was no way I was going to miss this event," he grinned.

"Why, Jimmie? Why was it so important for you to show up here? And why would you even want to? You have made it crystal clear that you are not in favor of this marriage, so why did you even bother showing up? I rolled my eyes at him, "Paul told me what you said about Troy and his family!" I relayed sharply, shaking my head. "From my understanding, you hate them all! So like I said, why in hell are you here?"

He grew silent for a moment, then grabbed my face and stared straight in my eyes, and spoke with bitterness. "Your brother was right. But I wanted to be around to see the look on your pretty little face when these big shots turned their noses up at you! And

they will, just as they do everyone else who doesn't fit into their circle. And then, just maybe! You'll come to your senses and realize you are totally out of your league marrying that white boy. You and I are much better suited for each other. Why in the world can't you see that?" he uttered sharply.

I ripped my face from his hands, looked around to see if anyone heard him. I was shaking in my tracks, anxious that someone would notice Jimmie's behavior. I took a deep breath when I noticed no one was paying attention.

"Keep your voice down, Jimmie, Please! And to answer your damn question, not that I owe you any explanations. But I can't see it, because I don't want to see it. I have made my choice. When are you going to get that through your thick skull? You've just got to accept it!" I said angrily, lowered my head and started to walk away from him, but he quickly jerked my arm.

"Yes! You have made your choice! Alright! And what a choice it is!" he shook his head. "Just a bogus display of imitation love for the richest guy on the block, who could probably buy you this whole stinking city. And then, what Maryann? You still wouldn't be happy! You don't a bit more love Troy Lake than you do that damn carpet you are standing on!" He pointed to the floor.

"I never would have pictured you for such a grandstand play as this. Living this huge lie! And why Maryann? Is it because you're fuming with the world for dealing you a losing hand with Cooper. God rest his soul." He shook his head, then grabbed two glasses of champagne from a passing servant's tray.

I stood there trembling from his words, afraid to death that his loud mouth and rude behavior would attract attention. I was angry enough to rip his cheap K-Mart suit right off his skinny frame.

"If only Cooper could see you now. What would he say? For sure, he wouldn't even recognize you! Because frankly, I can't even recognize you myself. So that should tell you something, Maryann. Give you some food for thought. But I'm sure it won't! Nothing has so far!" He stated coldly, turning one glass of the

champagne up to his lips, draining the glass quickly, then turning the second glass up to his mouth and draining it, then very rudely dropping both of the fine crystal glasses to the floor.

When he purposely dropped the champagne glasses to the carpet, I wanted to scream and splash my drink in his face, but I refrained myself. I wasn't about to allow him to cause me to make a scene and ruin my big night. So all I could do was smolder in my tracks at his drunken, eccentric, rude behavior.

"I say get down off your high horse and face yourself, sister."

I rolled my eyes at him. "Don't call me sister! I'm not your sister. Now would you please just leave! Because, Jimmie, I swear to you, if you keep carrying on like this, having no respect for me or these people's property, I'm going to call Paul over here and have him and his two buddies throw you out on your ear!" I stated crossly.

He looked at me and purposely trembled with a silly smirk on his face. "Should I be shaking in my boots, cause you might sic pretty boy and his buddies on me," he grinned, staggering against the refreshment table. "I don't think so. I'll tell you like this," he pointed his wobbly finger at me. "It would take someone a helluva lot more vigorous than your kid brother to throw me out of here. What's wrong with the rich boy? You don't think he's stout enough to protect your honor? Why didn't you offer his services to kick my ass?"

"Look! Jimmie. I don't want a scene in here, okay. I just said that because I want you out of here. Please!"

"Don't please me! Please yourself. Cause I might be halfway wasted right now. But you're full of it. Completely full of shit! And you need to ask yourself, can you be happy with some rich dude who probably don't even know which end is up in the sack. He probably doesn't know the first thing to do between the sheets with a fine sister like you! So tell me, Maryann," he licked his lips at me, slightly staggering, "Can that white boy take care of business?" He laughed, "But you know, I gotta hand it to Mr. Lake. He's smarter than I'm giving him credit for. Hell, he was able to

snow you and get in those panties. And now you're gonna walk down the aisle with him. So I should say he got it going on."

"Yes, I guess he does have it going on. At least I've never seen him make an ass out of himself the way you are doing right now! So will you get real! And get lost?" I grabbed my face, trying to hold back my tears.

"I can't believe you have showed up here, getting drunk and acting this way. So will you please do me a favor and get your drunk tail out of these people's house since you hate them so much? How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not interested in what you have to say," I argued sharply, trying to hold my voice to a mere mumble.

He was shaking his head, "I'm not going nowhere. Cause Maryann. Somebody need to set you straight and bring you back to your senses. Cause like I said, I might be loaded. But I still know what I'm talking about!" He glanced around the room staggering about, then propped his hand against the refreshment table to steady himself. His eyes were red and I had never seen him look more out of it.

"And as far as I can see, you need to take a long, hard look in the mirror, Miss Maryann Brooks. And ask yourself who in the hell are you? Cause you damn sure are not yourself! Not by a long shot! You hear me, Miss New Society! I don't care what you say. You haven't been yourself since Cooper's death," he said sharply in an even tone, looking around the room with a frown, as if he had contempt for everyone in the room.

Then he stared me directly in the eyes and shook his head. "The Maryann I remember had a heart! A real heart made of flesh and blood! Not that damn stone that is stuck inside of your chest!" He pointed to my chest.

I shook my finger in his face - not caring at that moment who had seen or heard. He had really gotten under my skin.

"Okay! That's it! Listen, Jimmie! If I'm so darn cold-hearted as you have pointed out! Do yourself a big favor and vanish

from my sight! Cause if I'm so awful - why even bother?"

He lowered his eyes and paused for a second. Then he quickly reached out and grabbed a fourth glass of champagne from one of the passing waiters. He turned the fine crystal glass of bubbling, expensive champagne to his mouth and narrowed his eyes at me.

"For your information, Maryann, I bother because you meant the world to Cooper. And he meant the world to me. He was not just my cousin, he was also my best friend. And not just because of that, but because I know that you have more feelings for me than you do that high society Lake dude. I know this is all a false facade. Your shield against life's unexpected pains. Everybody knows you're still bitter and angry over what happened to Cooper," he grinned, offering me a sip of his champagne.

I wanted to slap that glass right out of his hand.

"Yeah! Mr. Wise Guy! I guess you think you are real smart! I guess you think you can see inside of my head. But let me remind you, it's me with the education and not you! Have you forgotten you're just a mere simple supermarket manager!" I laughed in his face.

"So, I'm sorry to burst your bubble and say your little insight was totally off base! You're dead wrong! Now get the hell out of my sight! And stay the hell out of my life!" I said sharply, gritting my teeth.

As he stood there looking at me, he never stopped grinning. No matter how I told him off. It was as if he got some kind of pleasure out of stressing me out. I was waiting for him to turn and head toward the door. But he narrowed his deep brown eyes at me and shook his head.

"I don't think so!" he mumbled. "No way, girl. I don't think I'm wrong. But look, Hell, I still feel bad about it myself. He was my cousin and my best friend after all. But look at me Maryann. Do I wear black all the time? And do I seem bitter at the world, getting myself engaged to some rich person just to spite myself?" he

asked seriously.

He just wouldn't stop turning the knife. I was boiling with anger.

"Look at my evening gown. Does this look black to you?" I snapped.

"No! Maryann. I know my colors. But the point is the same. Except for special occasions, you only wear black. Hell, I'm not the only one who knows that. All your friends. Even Janet mentioned it once. Everybody knows so why are you giving me that look and coming out of a bag on me, as if I'm somewhere out in left field about your black frequent attire. But I think I hit the nail right on the head, and that wasn't one of your habits in the past. So Maryann, take a tip from me. He was my best pal and I have somehow managed to deal with his death and get on with my life. And so can you," he said sincerely in a low, calm voice.

I turned my back to him for a second, then faced him with water-filled eyes. I was hoping not to shed a tear in his presence.

"What does this look like, mister?" I pointed around the room to all the guests who were dancing, mingling, eating, laughing and drinking. They were all too busy to notice my confrontation with Jimmie.

"This is an engagement party! I'm getting on with my life!"

"You call this getting on with your life? This is just a phony display! You see, Maryann, you may have everybody in this big fancy room fooled. But I'm no dummy. And one day your Mr. Rich Boy will be the wiser! Because it's only a matter of time before your house of cards comes tumbling down."

At that very moment, I wanted to reach out and slap that know-it-all look off his face.

"How dare you say that to me! Get out! Get out right now!" I said firmly, trying to keep my voice down.

"I can say it to you, Maryann, because I know I'm right and you know I'm right and it doesn't matter how you stand here and try to deny it, I'll never buy that bull you're trying to sell! Never!"

"Well! Good! You don't have to buy it. And to be frank with you, Jimmie, I don't really give a flying hoot to what you think!" I snapped, pointing toward the door with fire in my eyes. "Now, there's the door! Let it hit you where I wish I could!" I stated coldly and gracefully walked away from him before he could grab my arm.

"Maryann. Don't walk away while I'm talking to you, girl," his words faded away as I kept strutting across the room to stand near Troy, who had no idea I was boiling inside over my heated conversation with Jimmie.

I placed my arm around his waist as he was in a discussion with one of the guests, but placed his arm around my shoulder to acknowledge my wanted presence.

I took a deep breath, hoping after the guest stepped away that Troy wouldn't mention, due to a lack of knowledge, Jimmie's badgering me over the refreshment table.

A few minutes later, I glanced around as Jimmie strutted quickly across the huge stretch of marble floor to the front door. He had his head in the air and looked angry enough to punch someone as he pushed his way through the crowd. And then I looked around and noticed Janet getting a cigarette from Paul, giving me a concerned look, then focusing her eyes towards Jimmie, shaking her head. She had, no doubt, witnessed Jimmie's rude, out-of-line behavior. Yet her eyes seemed to register a certain glow. But Jimmie never glanced around as he slammed his way out. And for one single moment, my mind entertained the thought that maybe Janet still had a sparkle in her eyes for him. But I shook my head as I looked across the room at her and smiled. Thinking to myself, no way could she still have a thing for Jimmie, considering how strung out she was over Otis Cox, her new, two-timing boyfriend.

Sunday morning came too fast. My head was pounding. I was tossing and turning in bed. All that sparkling champagne was boiling in my stomach. I felt tired and sick, and the bright sunshine glowing down against my window didn't help.

By noon, I rolled out of bed, and a hot soothing bubble bath did plenty to refresh me. But didn't work wonders like the three glasses of grapefruit juice I poured down my stomach.

Still somewhat tired, I stumbled down the hallway to the living room, dropped on the sofa and propped my head on two throw pillows. And in the midst of an half hour nap, I sat straight up from someone loudly knocking on the front door. I rushed to open the door and there stood Jimmie laughing. He walked right in with a bottle of beer in his hand. And from the look on his face, he had already had one too many.

I stared him up and down - shaking my head.

I didn't ask him to have a seat, because I was still fuming with him. And the more I thought that he would probably start in on me again, suggesting I'm marrying Troy for his money, the more I considered asking him to leave. And not to mention this very rude, foolish, drunken behavior last night. I wish I had punched him in the stomach and slammed the door in his face.

"What's so funny, Jimmie?" I asked sharply, as I crossed my eyes at him and propped both hands on my hips. "And anyway, you have some nerve coming over here after the embarrassment you caused me last night. I thought you cared so much for me. Where do you come off talking to me like that? You acted like a first-class jerk, to say the least." I sighed, shaking my head. "I mean, I never knew you could be such a bastard! Getting drunk and showing off at my party like that!" I shouted, fuming with disgust.

"And just in case you thought your little performance was just for me, no-way, Buddy! Janet called me after I got in last night. She said she noticed how you had cornered me over by the refreshment table, running your big mouth. And if she could hear you from where she was standing, I'm sure some of Troy's people heard you too!" I turned my back to him, then stared him down again. "With all the garbage you said last night, I shouldn't even speak to you!"

"But you will," he replied with a smirk on his face, "And we

both know why."

"You know, Jimmie, you are walking a very thin line with me!"

He strolled on across the living room floor, and took a seat on the couch as if I wasn't even talking to him.

"I didn't offer you a seat, Jimmie!" I yelled seriously.

He jumped right up, and dusted off the cushions.

"Well, excuse me. I almost forgot, you only mingle with the very rich. And a poor boy like me doesn't even have a chance," he grinned, pulling off his cap and bowing to me.

"I guess you find all of this quite amusing. But do you see me laughing?"

"No, I don't. But you know, Maryann, you really should. You look so much better when you're laughing. He placed his cap on the coffee table and took a seat grinning.

"Don't joke around with me, okay. I'm still ticked with you about last night. And why are you laughing? What's so funny?" I asked, agitated that he didn't feel the need to apologize.

"I'll tell you what's so funny. It's that so-called party I attended last night in your honor. Boy, that was a riot! Everybody there was as phony as play money!" he laughed.

I raised my hands. "Hold it right there, Jimmie! If that's what you drove all the way over here to talk about, you can just save your breath and leave! Because I don't want to hear it!" I screamed, snatching his cap from the coffee table - passing it to him.

"Alright, I'm sorry. I won't mention your fancy engagement party. But I would like to thank you for all that champagne. And what a difference a year makes. Last year this time, you and I were best pals. Now I need an invitation to see you." He gave me a tender, apologetic look.

I widened my eyes, but before I could speak, he smiled and turned his bottle up to his lips.

"You should know that I'm not trying to hurt you, Maryann. But I still think that party was a riot! Ha! Ha! Ha! One bigot after

another trying to impress each other."

I just ignored his statement as if I didn't even hear it. I could see the torture in his eyes. His hurt ran deep.

"Jimmie, isn't it a bit early for booze?"

"No, I don't think so, not since I have been hit with the cold hard facts of life." He frowned with stone cold eyes.

"What cold hard facts, Jimmie?" I asked.

He leaned forward and pointed at my face.

"That a sweet girl like you has sold out for money and material wealth over true love!" he screamed.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" I nervously muttered.

"What do you think it means! It means just that! Just what I said last night. How you have decided to marry Troy Lake along with all his money," he raised both arms. "Only for his wealth! When you really care for me. But heaven forbid, you would walk away from all that dough and marry an average nine to five guy as myself. Even though we both know that since Cooper died, I'm the only man you have ever felt close to. So tell me, Maryann, why can't you just admit it? What's so damn hard about telling the truth about how you feel about me? Why can't you just give in to your heart and admit that I'm the one you want!" he yelled angrily.

"You are not the one I want. Now get out!" I screamed, pointing toward the door.

"Those sparkling big chestnut brown eyes give you away. They are really asking me to stay," he whispered sincerely.

He sprung from the sofa and stepped toward me, grabbing my face with both hands. His hands were warm and forceful as he gripped my face, covering my mouth with the urgency of his smooth lips as he ran his fingers through my hair, tracing from my lips, kissing my neck in a wild, passionate manner.

"Maryann, I have dreamed about holding you in my arms. And I can't even begin to tell you how many times I have fantasized about kissing you and savoring the feel of your skin against mine," he said in a breathless voice against my throat. "I want you,

Maryann. I want you now. I have always wanted you. And deep down, I guess I have always loved you. Probably about as long as you have loved Cooper. But you loved my cousin, and I respected that, so all I could do was have you in my dreams." He stared down in my eyes with his hands cuffed behind my head.

"But, listen girl. Cooper is gone. And I know it's sad, and unfair and senseless, but yet it's true, Maryann. And you got to face it. That's life. We have to play the hand we are dealt," he paused and kissed my forehead.

I listened intensely in his eyes as his bold, spicy fresh smelling cologne sprung familiar urges and thoughts to my head about Cooper.

"You know, we are no longer those little kids who used to pass love letters in class. You were passing letters to Cooper and he was passing letters to you. And I was passing letters to you. And Janet was passing letters to me You and Cooper only had eyes for each other. And I only had eyes for you. But that was then, and this is now. And we are here, and you know how I feel about you. And Maryann, if I'm wrong, you'll have to tell me, but I sort of think you have feelings for me too," he whispered, covering my lips again and I struggled only slightly before throwing my arms around his back, clinging to him tightly, taking his kisses willingly and lustfully, wanting and needing his touch as much as he wanted and needed me. And somewhere in the back of my heart, being in his arms made me feel closer to Cooper, and why it made me feel closer to Cooper, I didn't know. I had searched my wildest dreams trying to figure it out, thinking that maybe because he was Cooper's best friend, the one someone who used to be his right hand when he was alive. And the fact that he wore the same cologne that Cooper used to wear didn't help matters.

We unlocked lips and his eyes burned down at me with lust written all over his face as he gripped my hand and led me down the hallway toward my bedroom. Hypnotized by thoughts of Cooper, I followed him willingly.

By the time we walked into my room, I was still in a daze. And the enthusiasm and intensity of his heated emotion had drained me of my strength as I felt as light as a feather. And when he locked the door, I fell right in his arms, allowing him to hold me and kiss me continuously as I fantasized about Cooper.

"Jimmie, I can't, you-know-what with you. I'm not about to hop in that bed over there with you," I said firmly, pointing to my bed. "It wouldn't be right. I'm engaged. I can't do this," I pushed against his chest, but he didn't loosen his grip.

"No! Look, don't push me away. I'm not trying to do what you think," he kissed me repeatedly against the neck. "I just want to kiss your soft, luscious lips," he brought his mouth down on mine, gripping me, then journeyed ever so tenderly back down to the center of my throat.

"Well, you just did."

"I know. But I'm not talking about on these lips," he traced across my bottom lip.

I was wearing a long lacy black skirt, which was buttoned down the front, and as he dropped to his knees and started unfastening it as his hands couldn't seem to move fast enough. My heart pounded with anticipation as my face warmed and heat ripped beneath my skin at the realization of what he meant.

With my eyes closed and my head braced against the wall, I could hear his low, sexy moans, but it was Cooper's face that I saw in my mind.

I felt his hands tremble as he unfastened the last button. But just as he delicately slipped my skirt to the floor, the front door slammed. And his face fell to my bare feet as he gripped my ankles and kissed and licked the top of my feet and ankles like an animal in heat. But the jolt from the front door brought me back to reality and my eyes widened.

"That is probably Mama. You've got to go," I whispered breathless.

"But, Girl I can't move. I'm savoring the thought of you."

"No. Come on, get up from there."

"I know," he agreed, glancing up at me, shaking his head as he gripped my skirt in his hand, which laid there on the floor beside him and buried his face in it before handing it to me as he stood to his feet.

He grinned exhausted, placing the garment in my hand, shaking his head.

"I tell you, Mrs. Brooks has the worst timing. Cause girl, I'm on fire. You send my temperature right to the roof."

I was nodding, "I know. I know. I know," while throwing on my skirt and hurrying with the buttons. "But you got to get out of here before Mama finds you in my room. I'm an engaged woman, remember?" I said, cracking my bedroom door and peeping out.

I looked both ways and didn't see or hear anyone, then grabbed Jimmie by the hand and led him quickly and quietly on our tiptoes to the back door.

He bent down to kiss my cheek goodbye and I smiled.

"Now, don't go and get any false hopes just because I allowed you to kiss me a couple times," I said seriously.

But he merely grinned as he turned to walk away - throwing me a kiss.

"I don't have any false hopes. I have true hopes. I think you have seen the light. So I'm not worried. I'm sure the next time you see Mr. Lake, you'll tell him you have seen the light and he's not in it."

Three days later, as Troy and I were taking a moonlight walk in the backyard, he noticed how quiet I was. I just couldn't shake Jimmie's words. And I couldn't forget how right he had been about everything.

Troy placed me against the tall pear tree and looked down at the top of my head. He lifted my face with both hands up to his view and tenderly held my face, bringing his face down to mine, covering my lips with his. I wound my fingers in his short blonde hair, pulling his face toward me even more, but my heart kept

screaming out for Cooper. I wanted love. And I wanted to make love. But only with Cooper, a man who was dead and buried.

As I closed my eyes in his arms, I could see the smooth-silky copper tone face that always lit up my eyes and the shiny green eyes that always made me smile. God knows, I was trying very hard to push him out of my head. But I could see Cooper's face every time I closed my eyes.

Troy pulled away and looked me directly in the face with confusion heavy in his big brown eyes.

"What's wrong, Maryann? And don't tell me it's nothing. I know better than that. Something is bugging you! And I would like to know what in the hell it is! I have tiptoed around - trying to give you your space, hoping you would get around to confiding in me. But it doesn't seem like that's ever going to happen. So I'm asking you, Maryann, would you mind letting me in on this problem you have - that's been causing all this distant behavior for the last few days!" he said angrily.

I pulled away and stepped away with my back to him, a bit shaky from his upset tone. I took a deep breath with my head toward the sky and within seconds, he had slung me facing him.

"Look at me, Maryann. What is it?" he demanded in a sharp tone.

"I said it's nothing," I mumbled with my head lowered.

I looked down at the snow covered ground and I wanted the grounds to break open and swallow me up. I wanted to disappear out of my own skin. I hated my life. I hated my world.

"I know what you said! But I'm not buying it, Maryann! Now, what is the damn problem?" he gripped my shoulders, and let loose as quick as he grabbed them.

"And if you don't like my tone and language, that's just too bad! Because I think I have been more than patient while you have been moping around for the last few days, acting weird when we're together." He hit his forehead, "And that's the key word, "acting." Acting to have a good time, when you really seemed like you would

rather be someplace else. And anyway," he touched my shoulder. "What kind of marriage do you expect for us to have if you won't confide in me?" he asked in a loud and angry tone.

My eyes widened and I bit down hard on my bottom lip, inhaled deeply and raised both arms and turned my back to him.

"Okay! If you must know! I'm having second thoughts about marrying you. I'm just not sure if it's the right thing. I'm confused," I grabbed my face to wipe my flowing tears.

"You are what? Look at me, Maryann! Turn around and face me, girl. And would you please run that by me again?" he screamed.

With my back still to him, I mumbled.

"You heard me."

"Okay! You're right! I did hear you! But how could you toy with me like this? And I guess this is about your dead ex-fiance's cousin, Mr. Jimmie Tyler! I bet I'm right. I guess you still aren't sure whether you would be better off without him or with me. Some silly idea that being with Jimmie Tyler makes you feel closer to some dead man! For heaven's sake! What in the hell can Jimmie offer you? He's a bartender turned supermarket manager. Take your pick between the two professions and see what you come up with! Zip! You want the lifestyle I can give you. I know you do. You have only told me a hundred times. So what are the second thoughts for?" he pleaded in a calmer voice.

I looked around at him and covered my face, shaking my head. "Troy, I'm sorry. But I know I can't marry you. Even though you are right. I do want the lifestyle that you can offer me. I have always wanted that lifestyle, ever since I was old enough to know - that being wealthy meant I could live in a beautiful house like yours and have all the material things my heart desired. So you are right, mister. I wanted and I still want the lifestyle that you can give me. But no matter how I crave wealth, it can't seem to erase one important fact, and that fact is the one thing that I want even more."

Troy's expression turned stone cold.

"Yeah, I know! - Jimmie Tyler!" he screamed, turning on his heels - heading toward his car.

"You may not believe this! But this break up has nothing to do with Jimmie. It has everything to do with my own heart and my own mind." I pointed to my head.

"Just you and me. It's all about how I feel and how I have come to realize that I can't continue to deceive you. You don't deserve it! So you see, it's not about Jimmie. But seriously I do care about him. But I'm not in love with him. I'm no more ready for a relationship with him than I am with you." I said as disgust of myself boiled in my stomach.

He paused and shook his head. His eyes told the story. He didn't believe me.

"Go tell that lie to someone who will believe it! Because frankly, I have suspected for awhile now that you were probably getting it on with Mr. Tyler! God knows, you weren't sleeping with me. And heaven forbid I even mention sex! I can hear your words singing in my head right now: "No Troy. I'm not ready." Those same words drove me up the damn wall. But I figured you were worth the wait! Little did I know I would be eating those words." He shook his head and kicked at the snow. "Cause you are no damn virgin - that's for sure!"

"But, Troy I am," I mumbled.

"Oh, you are?" he screamed and threw his car keys on the snowy ground. "Don't insult me anymore Maryann Brooks with your lies! You expect me to believe you are still a virgin when I can't believe anything out of your mouth! What kind of a virgin are you? One who lies and deceives and destroys other peoples lives? Answer me!" he demanded. "Is that the kind of virgin you are?"

"Yes! I'm a black virgin! My heart is black! My soul is black! My world is black! My whole insides are black! When Cooper died, the lights of my spirit died too!" I screamed, wiping my tears with all ten fingers as quickly as they rolled down my face.

"You answered that right. You are a black virgin, one I

never want to deal with again!" He took a few steps and glanced back at me with a half smile with water-filled eyes and paused.

"Have a nice life, Maryann. Enjoy your humble existence with Mr. Tyler. Because the lifestyle that you really want he could live a couple hundred years and never come close to being able to give it to you. I just want you to remember that when you're sitting around trying to put two dimes together to pay your mortgage! Or should I say rent? Because how in the hell will he ever be able to buy you a house? And just in case you have second thoughts again after I drive away. Don't even think about running back to me! I'm no longer looking for a money-hungry, material bitch! And I'll tell you why! Material girls like you will take and squeeze everything they can - out of someone like me, who is a big enough fool to let you - thinking your love is sincere, when the only thing that is really sincere is your desire for that person's bank book." He looked down at the ground and shook his head.

"Cause look how I gave you my heart and everything I thought you wanted! And this is what I get! A real big kick in the teeth!" he started buttoning his knee-length suede coat.

"But it's not doing me any good to stand here and bitch with you about it! Because I was the fool! A real live sucker! And I guess you know - that your decision to call off this marriage has scattered my heart into a million pieces! A million tiny pieces that will not mend overnight!" But I'll survive!" he uttered sadly in my eyes.

I stepped toward him and looked down at my left hand. I held my left hand and stared at the sparkling, glittering 5-kt. diamond that I had worn with pride for the last seven months, then I slipped it off my finger and handed it to him.

He took the ring and stuck it in his coat pocket without batting an eye. He looked up at the sky and turned his back to walk on, but paused over his shoulder for a second, and said in a low, calm voice.

"And before I go, guess what? I still love you. But with

time, and the love and support of good friends and family, I'll wash you right out of my heart! And out of my system! And out of my head! And out of my mind! Because God knows, it won't be easy." He paused up at the moon and back to me.

I couldn't bring myself to say a single word as I stood there with my tears and aching heart. My heart cried out in silence for him. My lips wanted to say, "Please forgive me for your pain. I'm sorry." But my silence remained. I felt unworthy of his forgiveness.

"Maryann, there was a time when great anguish ripped through me just to see you shed one tear. Now you shed many and not even one bit of agony pinches my heart. Could it be - that it's already overflowing?" He faced me and folded his arms, as he leaned against his car.

"But, hey, don't pity me. I'm a big boy. I should have known I was walking into quicksand, right! I was supposed to be able to see beyond your innocent eyes. But I didn't. So I'm guilty. And my only crime was allowing you to steal my complete trust. And as if that wasn't enough, you burglarized my heart and got inside. So deep inside that you were all I could consume," he said in a sad, calmer voice. "So you see, Maryann, I'm no fool." He paused down at his snow covered shoes and stomped them a couple times on the driveway, knocking the snow off.

I walked over near him and stood just a couple feet away, rubbing and blowing in my hands from the cold.

He stared at me with sad eyes and shook his head. "Like I said, I'm no fool. I'm just standing here going on and on acting like one. But I stand accused and I'm guilty of loving you. But it's strange. And I'll tell you why. You see, I look at your beautiful, radiant, flawless face and deep into your sparkling eyes, and you know what? It's like you're not even standing there." He glanced down and up again, sticking both hands in his coat pocket.

"It's true, Maryann. It's like I'm standing here talking to a stranger. Because the person I fell in love with, that sweet caring person would have never lied to me and my entire family. She

would have never agreed to be my wife, then say, 'Oops, I made a mistake.' Causing me and my parents to lose thousands of dollars on a wedding, which is only two weeks away, which won't be taking place."

"Troy, don't do this," I reached out and touched his arm.

My heart was completely broken. He was such a kind and sweet man. Just an all around nice guy. And rich to boot. But my heart was made of stone it seemed, because out of all the good times and happiness we had shared, he never once pierced it. Only Cooper had been able to turn my cement heart into jelly.

"You are right. Troy I'm not that dream girl. I'm not the pure soul you made me out to be. I'm just dying with darkness and sadness. And it seems everyone I touch I cause pain and misery for just like myself. I wanted to love you! And I tried to love you! I tried with all my heart!" I touched his arm again and stared in his eyes at his tears that wouldn't fall.

"But Troy, it never came! And how I wanted it to come! I wanted to love you and live in your world more than mere words could ever say! It was your love and your world that I fought to be privileged to. But after I had all the gold I had ever wished for on a silver platter, I was still empty handed and unfulfilled. Because I still hungered and craved for the one thing that I lost. The one thing that money can't buy! True love. The kind of love I used to feel for Cooper Valentine when I was barely 18 years old. That was true love. I didn't have to wonder or think about it. I just knew it. And what I feel for you is just on the surface of my heart. It's not deep down inside where it really counts," I said, wiping my tears with my scarf around my neck.

"So you see, Troy. I'm not good enough for you. You deserve someone who can love you the way you deserve to be loved. You deserve true love from someone. The true love that I can't give you. So just leave here, Troy. And please don't lose any sleep over me. Because after all the agony I have caused you, do you really think I'm worth it! No, I'm not! Not after I lead you on for months.

I lied to you! I lied to my parents! I lied to your parents! And most of all I lied to myself! But now I have seen the light. All the fog has been lifted, and I know it's time to be honest. And as painful and sad as it is, it would have been even worse if I had withheld my true feelings a day longer," I said in a low, sad voice.

He hit his fist on the hood of his car.

"Yeah, maybe you are being honest, Maryann. But at what cost? He shook his head. "And if you think your soul searching confession is making me feel better. Just keep it! It's not helping. Cause even if you had a change of mind, I wouldn't touch you again with a ten-foot pole. Your lies carry too much venom! Enough to permanently destroy!" He jerked his car door open and to ok a seat, dropping his head on the steering wheel.

I looked on with my hands covering my wet, cold face. It was as if a river had burst in me, and my tears would never stop. With each breath I took, the truth of what he had said stabbed at me. For all my common and decent sense that my parents raised me with, I should have realized long before it got to this point - that I was making a huge mistake - trying to convince myself that I wanted to be with Troy, when deep down I was looking for an escape from my own dark world.

As I stood there in the night with all my hurt and shame, the sound of his car engine starting and fading down the street, somehow made my heart race with even greater pain. Then as I stood there at the side of the house, only silence accompanied me. I dropped down to my knees and sat on the cold, snowy grass. The moonlight was still bright overhead - but the woods directly to the left of the house were dark and scary. The tall trees and bushes seemed spooky. But I looked toward the house and noticed the kitchen light. Seeing that light made me feel instant security, knowing my folks were inside.

Suddenly, in the midst of my sadness, a calm embraced me. The calm and peace of honesty, of not marrying a man I didn't love. Now, honesty toward Jimmie was next. I slowly made my way inside to write Jimmie a letter.

Dear Jimmie,

This letter probably will, but shouldn't come to you as much of a surprise. And it pains me to admit that you were right about my feelings toward Troy, but you were. I called off the wedding and gave him back his ring tonight. But before you get too comfortable with this letter, I should say, our little thing is over also.

Jimmie, please accept my apology and try to understand that I'm trying to get myself back on the right track. But, honestly, I must confess, I don't even know what the right track is anymore. I just know I'm not in love with you and I don't want to play any more games.

Seriously speaking, I think you should give Janet a call. I'm not sure how you feel about her, but I think there could be something still in her heart for you. Now that's the girl who loved you that you let get away!

Maryann

A few days later, in the early evening while I was home alone, who but Jimmie rang the bell and stepped inside fit to be tied.

"Maryann, what is this?" he held the letter up to my face.

"It's the truth, Jimmie! It's how I feel! I'm sorry, okay! I'm sorry! But I can't deal with this now. I'm already down about how things turned out with Troy," I grabbed my face and dropped down on the sofa.

He was shaking his head, "Maryann. You have a damn problem! You sure know how to lead a man on, then just like that, you're no longer interested. You are just a damn teaser! That's all you are!" he pointed his finger at me.

"I said I was sorry! I'm not in love with you! What do you

want me to do, keep pretending the way I was doing with Troy?" I screamed.

"You didn't seem like you were pretending when we were back there in your bedroom last week!" he pointed down the hall toward my room.

"So what do you call that Maryann? You were all into being kissed and touched by me, and you didn't push me away not once, and if Mrs. Brooks hadn't come home, we probably would have gone a step further," he said in a calmer tone.

"I'll tell you what you call that, Jimmie! You call it deception! Cause all the while I was in your arms, I was focusing on being with Cooper!" I blurted out.

The look in his eyes said it all, he couldn't have shown more pain if I had stabbed him with a knife.

"So, there you have it, Jimmie. You made me tell you! I used you! Okay? I used you! Just like I used Troy! So now you see, I'm not worth the damn effort. I have some serious problems that I need to work through."

He didn't utter another word. He raised up both arms, shook his head and merely jerked the door open and ripped out, jumping in his old truck, burning rubber down the street.

I was already downhearted before he had shown up, and now I felt even worse. I grabbed my purse and car keys and decided to head over to Bennigan's on Clinton and Madison for a glass of wine. I needed something to clear my head and stop the pain. But after only one drink at Bennigan's, I noticed I didn't have my wallet with me. But the nice Bartender, whose name was Jeremy Tellis, took my name and phone number so he could call and pick up the $4.50 I left there owing, which he replaced out of his own pocket. I was very thankful to him.

Three weeks later, right after all the New Year parties and galas Janet had dragged me to, the next weekend coming up, I wanted to hang by myself. Cause I was miserable and I just wanted to be left alone with a drink to try and drown out my sadness. And

even though I knew a drink never solved my problems, it seemed the only way to numb them.

So it was a whole new year, 1991, but my future still looked bleak and I didn't seem to have anything to cheer for. So that next Friday night around 8:00 p.m., still downhearted and upset with myself, I got dressed and headed to the Pump Room downtown. It was one of the places Cooper used to love to eat. But after sitting at the bar for no more than fifteen minutes, to my surprise Tanner, Freddie, Mark and Stuart walked in. They all took seats at the bar smiling and admiring me, and just as Mark stepped off his stool to head toward me, the waiter tapped his shoulder.

"Mr. Franklin, your table for four is ready. Follow me."

He followed the waiter, and so did Tanner, Stuart and Freddie. But they kept smiling toward me. And to my surprise, after they were out of my sight, all seated for dinner, I got a whiff of a familiar breathtaking men's cologne. I glanced up to my right and Freddie was standing right beside me - smiling.

"I thought you went to have dinner?"

"With you sitting here, you think I can eat?"

"Well, you might as well go - because I don't want to be bothered."

"Your beautiful eyes still look sad, just like they did in '86 and here it is '91 and they still look as sad," he said, pulling up the stool next to mine, taking a seat.

"What can we do about that, Maryann? You still won't cut me any slack and let me take you out?"

I grabbed my face and shook my head.

"Freddie! Please! I don't want to be bothered."

"And I am sad because of everything, Mama has been sick for weeks. And doctor's diagnosis wasn't good. She has that damn...destroyer disease."

"Cancer?" he asked.

I nodded, "Yes! What else, man can't seem to find a cure for? They can go to the moon and back, but they can't rid the world

of that stinking killer!"

"I'm sorry to hear that about your Mom. But just hope for the best."

After a short pause, he touched my hand.

"Oh, by the way, I read about you calling off your wedding. I was pleased to hear it. But I guess that was pretty tough on you."

"Yes. It was tough. I didn't mean for it to happen that way. Troy is a good man. He was good to me," I said draining my glass of wine.

The moment I sat my glass on the counter, the bartender picked it up, pointing to the glass, and Freddie answered.

"Yes another white wine for the lady and a scotch and seven for me."

He was ordering me another drink, but I had just had two, which was my limit. But I grabbed that glass and took two big swallows right quick, and I could feel myself getting all warm and giddy.

"Well, Girl, you called it off, so there must have been a problem somewhere."

"Yes, Freddie. Me! I'm the problem. I'm sick. I need to see a shrink. I can't seem to love anybody. And that's what I want, Freddie," I gazed into his eyes as he sat there listening to me so attentively.

"I want to fall in love. I want to love someone. I tried to love Troy. Really, I tried. I thought all his wealth and getting engaged would make it happen. But it didn't. I couldn't love him. And my best friend, ex-boyfriend, Jimmie, I couldn't love him either," I paused, taking another sip of wine, with my eyes still glued on his.

"That's Cooper's cousin, right? The one who stormed into your house looking for your friend that time?" he grinned.

I nodded.

"Is he the one who drives that old ragged green pickup that I have seen you in a couple of times?" he grinned.

"Yes, that's him," I giggled. "He'll probably drive that piece of junk until it falls apart."

"So you and him?" he asked.

I shook my head, "No, Freddie. There was nothing there. It was just one big mess. But like I was saying, I tried to have feelings for Jimmie since he's Cooper's first cousin and plus I felt so sorry for him after the way Janet had dumped him. But I couldn't make myself love him either."

"Maryann. Love is not something you can make happen. Love is something that just happens."

"I know, Freddie. But why can't I feel anything for anybody?"

He touched my cheek, "Now, see that's where I think you're wrong. I think you can feel. But for some reason, you're afraid to let yourself feel. I think you're afraid if you allow yourself to feel, you might forget what you had with Cooper. And, therefore, in your mind if that happens, you have deceived him."

"Freddie why are you saying this garbage to me? You're no shrink. So do me a favor and stop trying to get inside of my head," I snapped, turning my face away.

"You see, the truth hurts. I struck a nerve, otherwise what I said wouldn't have bothered you. I think I'm right," he grinned.

"Maybe you are," I turned to him and smiled, almost losing my balance on the stool, but he placed his hand against my back.

"Be careful. I think your stool is lopsided," he was looking down at the foot of the stool.

"I need another drink," I beckoned for the bartender.

"No, Maryann," he touched my face.

I threw him a huffy look, "What you mean? No, Maryann? I can have as many drinks as I want. I'm not falling off this stool anyway. Like you said, this thing is sitting crooked anyway."

"No, listen, Maryann," he said sensuously low. "I was hoping that maybe you would join me for a drink over at the Westin. What do you say?"

I gazed into his eyes and he winked at me, nodding his head. And by then, the bartender was standing there waiting for my order.

"Did you want another white wine?" the bartender asked.

But Freddie kept looking at me, smiling and waiting for my answer, so I turned to the bartender and shook my head.

"We're ready for the check now," Freddie said, pulling a stack of money from his jacket pocket.

"Let's see, three white wines and one scotch and seven. That will be $33.00 even," the bartender uttered.

"Here's $50.00. Keep the change," Freddie handed the bill to the bartender and he couldn't thank Freddie enough, shaking his hand.

"Now you two have a good time. And come back soon," the bartender said, as Freddie helped me with my coat and we headed out.

After only one drink in the lounge at the Westin Hotel, Freddie escorted me to a suite he was renting for the night. And as he was taking off my coat, all smiles, he tickled me under the chin.

"You feel something for me. I know you do. Look at that big smile," he teased.

"Yes. I do feel something for you, but feeling something for you doesn't matter. Because my heart won't release itself to you. It just won't."

"But, Girl. I have fallen for you, Maryann. I dig the hell out of you. And it's driving me crazy as hell!"

"You don't dig me. You just want to get me in that bed over there," I snapped.

He grabbed my shoulders gently and shook me.

"Look at my eyes. Look hard and deep! Now tell me what you see. Tell me what your deep down gut is telling you. And if you tell me you don't see the real thing in my eyes for you - then you can walk out of that door over there and I'll never bother you again!" he pointed toward the door.

We just gazed into each other's eyes.

"Do you think this is a game? Or do you think I'm on the level?"

I nodded in his eyes.

"Are you nodding, yes you think this is a game? Or are you nodding yes you think I'm on the level?"

"I'm nodding, I think you're on the level."

Before I could finish my statement, he had gathered me up in his strong arms, landing me against the wall, bringing his handsome face down on mine, desperately swallowing me up with his sensuous mouth. And we clung to each other and kissed long and passionately like there was no tomorrow. After we kissed ourselves to an exhausted state, I thought he would try and get me in bed, but he wanted to talk.

We took a seat on the sofa facing each other, all smiles and he couldn't stop holding my face and looking into my eyes.

"Okay, so you believe me?"

I nodded, still smiling.

"Okay, pretty woman. Where do we go from here? Okay, let's see. Before I go any further, I want to do this properly," he grabbed my right hand, lifted it to his lips and kissed it.

My heart skipped a beat. Could he? Would he? Ask me to marry him? The thought of the possibility overwhelmed me.

"Maryann. Will you be my woman? And I mean my girlfriend. I feel something for you - that I didn't even know was inside of me. And I'll be frank, no other woman has ever made me feel this way."

I started crying.

"I can't believe you're saying this to me. Something inside of me wanted to hear you say this. But something inside of me won't allow me to accept it."

But, Girl, I can see it in your eyes. There is something there."

"I know there's something there! I told you it doesn't matter. Because my heart will never release itself to you!"

"What in the hell are you talking about? Girl? What kind of double-talk are you giving me? You either want to be with me or you don't! Tell me in plain English and I'll get the message."

I hopped off the sofa and paced back and forth for a second. Then gave him a pitiful, sad look.

"I can't be with you, Freddie. I can't be your woman."

He sprang from the sofa, grabbing me up in his arms, bringing his smooth, sensuous lips down on mine, kissing me tenderly, tracing his lips down to my throat, draining all my strength. And kissing him was heavenly.

"I think you do want to be my woman. Say it, pretty girl. If you just say the word - I'll make all your dreams come true. Say it, and we can make wild, passionate love all night long in that big king size bed over there. Say it, and we can even live together. Say it, and whatever you want is yours." He kept kissing my throat and covering my lips once more.

But suddenly, a cold chill hit me, and I trembled in his arms, as a voice in my head said, "Giving in to Freddie would mean being disloyal to Cooper. Freddie is one person you must forget. And just face the facts that you're never going to be able to love anyone ever again."

I started shaking and crying.

"Take me home! I got to get away from you! Please! I don't want you! Please! Don't ever try to see me or call me!"

I didn't have to tell him twice, he drove me to my car, which was in the Pump Room parking lot, parked his car in the lot and drove me home in my car and hopped a taxi right after he saw me to my door, not attempting to try to kiss me again or anything. And the disappointed look on his face said it all. He was through with me, and took me at my word and didn't bother me again.

PART THREE: **A WORLD APART**

Chapter Twelve

Losing Mama to liver cancer at the young age of 57, on March 4, 1993, hit us all like a ton of bricks. And here it was almost a year later, and I still missed her so much. Mama's health started failing about one year after Cooper passed. Her condition got so bad that she took an early retirement from teaching. She wanted me to take up the teaching profession where she left off, and I promised her I would. And I'm sure it was that promise to her that kept me focused toward getting my degree. Otherwise, I would have ditched my education, just like I ditched my hope.

She suffered from watching me suffer. Because she watched me, her only daughter, who had once been a caring, sweet, happy young woman, transform into a bitter, angry, deeply sad person, right before her beautiful caring eyes. A transformation that somehow swallowed me up. And besides, from the bitterness and anger, I picked up bad habits like eating too much and turning to cigarettes. And it was only by the grace of God, with my new abusive eating

habit, that I didn't put on any extra weight, maintaining the 107 pound figure that Cooper fell in love with - with no help from me. Yet, my dark past still followed me and haunted me day and night. My heart was sealed, unable to give or receive love. My cup was filled with sadness, disappointment and pain. Only my college studies and the promise I made to Mama about becoming a math instructor, kept me from falling over the edge.

It was around supper time as I was busy setting the table for dinner. It was just the two of us now, since Paul had landed a management position with an elite Jaguar dealership and got his own apartment. The entire house reeked of chicken and homemade biscuits. Daddy's favorite meal. I always tried to make his favorite meals and do little special things for him, since Mama's passing, because I realized how he missed her desperately. Plus, at 62, his health wasn't the best. He was always complaining about back pains, which caused him to take an early retirement from the post office.

The clock on the stove made a loud buzzing sound, which indicated the stew was ready. I turned off the fire beneath the pressure cooker, carefully removed the lid and placed the steaming hot, vegetable-packed stew into a serving bowl. And just as I set out the plates, there was a knock on the front door. From the familiar laugh, I knew it was Janet.

"Come in, Janet. Maryann is back in the kitchen," Dad mumbled.

"How are you this evening Mr. Brooks? That snow is really coming down out there. We already have about two inches. If it keeps up like this, traffic is going to be crazy tomorrow. And better yet, they'll probably close the schools," Janet laughed.

She stepped into the kitchen, pulling off her coat.

My heart skipped a beat. I was not in the mood for her visit. She was my closest friend, but lately her visits had just rubbed me the wrong way. Her attitude about the way I was living, plus her strong dislike for Jeremy, was just too much to stomach.

"Maryann, are you doing anything right now? It's snowing

like crazy. But I thought we could go shopping for a couple hours and check out that new shopping center, over near 95th Street. Plus, if the snow keeps up like this, we may not have to teach tomorrow. Wouldn't that be swell if we got the day off?" She smiled, shaking the snow from her scarf.

"I'm not sure I can go. We're just getting ready for dinner," I uttered quickly, wishing she would just leave.

I wasn't for small talk or socializing. Ever! I just wanted to hide with my darkness.

"Well, what about I wait until you're done eating," she suggested. She pulled out a chair and took a seat at the table. "Oh, by the way, I bumped into your kid brother yesterday." She grinned - pulling a pack of cigarettes from her purse, ripping them open. "What a cutie he has turned out to be."

"Oh, yeah, where did you bump into Paul at?" I asked.

"At Lee's Drugs on Wilson Street. That boy looks better and better as the years go by. For a 19-year old, he could easily pass for 25," she said, lighting up her cigarette.

"Janet, what or who are you thinking about? Paul is 22 now. I'm four years older than him, remember? Where in the world did you get 19 from?" I asked - taking the biscuits from the oven.

"That's right, he is legal now. The same age as Pam. And speaking of my little sister, she used to talk about Paul all the time, before she left home for Michigan State.

"She was so crazy about him. But they never went out together - did they?"

"Who are you asking? I sure don't know. I have never seen any of Paul's women. You know how private that boy has always been. He may be older, but he hasn't changed. He still keeps to himself, and is as private as ever."

Maybe but I tell you, he has really matured and could easily pass for 25. And get this, if he and his fine friend hadn't been in such a rush, I would have asked him to introduce me to that hunk." She laughed.

"So make sure you tell Paul when he's over again that I'm dying to rub shoulders with his good looking friend."

"Sure you want to rub shoulders with him." I shook my head. "Who are you kidding? I don't care how fine Paul's friend might be. Otis is the only man you want. Plus," I paused and leaned against the fridge. "I'm not sure when that might be. Cause since Paul moved out of the house and got his own place on the north side, he hardly ever drops by. But I guess we understand. He's spending all his spare time with his new girlfriend. He's head-over-heels in love and just called the other night and announced their engagement. I tell you, one month out of the house and he's already engaged. But Dad and I have yet to meet this girl."

"What? That kid is getting married? Well, I shouldn't call him a kid. Because as I said, he's very much a man. And whoever the lucky girl is, tell him congrats. Anyway, as I said before, I'll wait until you're done eating," she reminded me - mashing her cigarette in the ashtray.

"I'm afraid I can't go. I'm expecting company. Jeremy is coming over later. What about tomorrow?" I asked, placing the biscuits on a serving platter and glanced over my shoulder to watch her reaction about my mentioning Jeremy.

"Oh, I see. Jeremy Tellis is coming over later? The charmer who only comes out at night." She rolled her eyes, shaking her head. "Thought you had dumped that jerk. You're still fooling around with him? So I guess Jimmie is history."

"Cut it out, Janet. Why are you calling him a jerk? And what gave you the idea that I had stopped seeing him? I never told you that!" I said sharply - gritting my teeth. "Plus I thought you knew I stopped seeing Jimmie when I broke up with Troy."

"So, Mr. Tyler is available again." She stared into space and slightly smiled, then quickly looked toward me with a straight face.

"I'm sorry. Never mind. Just thought you and Jeremy weren't hitting it off anymore. I guess I figured that, because I never see the two of you out anywhere," Janet apologized.

"Oh, I see. But why did you roll your eyes and make that frown, calling him a jerk? Is there something you know that I don't?" I stared with my arms folded.

"Just forget it, okay? Forget I ever said that," she folded her lips and stared seriously in my eyes.

"No, I don't think so!" I propped against the fridge with my arms still folded.

"I'm not about to let this slide! Just answer my question, and tell me why you think of Jeremy as a jerk. Damn it, you don't really even know him, Janet. Just like the rest of my so-called friends don't really know him. But yet all of you keep making these little remarks and whispering behind my back about him," I said sharply.

"Wait a minute. I haven't been whispering behind your back. You know me better than that. Cause whatever I have to say or think of the man, I will tell you in your face," Janet snapped.

"Maybe so, but just like I said. You guys don't really know him. You're only going by things you have heard!"

"That's my point, Maryann! None of us really know this guy. Let me see, you first mentioned him back in October. And that was what? Five months ago? And I have yet to see the two of you out anywhere. And even yet, I have yet to see this guy called Jeremy." She paused and lit up another smoke, shaking her head.

"What is this man's problem? Does he think he's too hot to be seen in public with a woman on his arm?" She looked down her nose and smiled. Took a drag from her cigarette and shook her head.

"I think not! Not from what I've been hearing about him."

"See, there you go again! It's always what you have heard. Why don't you guys just butt out of my business with Jeremy! He may not be wealthy like Troy Lake. But at least I'm not seeing him to escape from my own world. I'm with him for the right reasons! Because I want to be! Because I like his company. So just butt out! I'm not busy trying to find out about your affairs with Otis. Why can't you and the rest of my friends do me the same favor? Keep your hearsay! Please!" I yelled, grabbed the butter dish from the

fridge and slammed the door hard.

"But, Maryann! I did hear...."

I raised both hands and cut her off before she could complete her sentence.

"Yeah, see, there you go again with hearsay. And just what have you heard?" I asked as my heart raced and my face warmed.

"I've heard what everybody else has heard. The stuff about his parents. Old man Jim and Birdie Tellis. How they were and still are the two biggest drunks in all of the south side of this city. And he is probably no better. And everybody is pulling their hair out trying to figure out how and why a smart, classy, very attractive girl like you, who was once engaged to a national rock star and one of the richest fellows in the windy city, go settling on throwing your life away with this guy! Who, from what I hear, barely has a high school education. Not to mention the weird places and people I hear he hangs with. And with all these strikes against him, he still has the nerve to treat you like dirt. When he should be down on his knees kissing the ground you walk on-- that you are even giving him the time of day!"

"That's it, Janet Nelson! I know we are best friends and have been since 9th grade.. And I guess you think that gives you some kind of rights over my life. But it doesn't! I have heard enough! So he doesn't drive the finest car or wear the finest clothes! But who in the hell cares! Not I! And maybe he doesn't live in the best part of town. But so what! He's a decent man. A hard working decent man. And that's all that matters! Because he could be the President of the United States' son and I still couldn't fall in love or be truly happy. I lost true happiness when Cooper left and I know I'll never find it again. And I'm not even searching anymore. Jeremy is in my life. And that's that."

"So you have given up on love? And have decided to settle for some guy who treats you like dirt."

"When in the world are you going to ever put your past behind you? You can't keep beating yourself up over what happened

with Troy Lake. That's why you are punishing yourself to stick with this Jeremy. So you made a mistake! Who in the hell hasn't? Plus that was what? Three years ago? Do you plan to wear black and call yourself evil forever? I say let it all go. Troy has long forgotten it. It's not like he is the only man who has ever been left at the alter. Plus, how much sleep did he lose over it? He didn't lick his wounds long before he married the mayor's daughter only six months after all that shit hit the fan. So when are you going to stop licking your wounds, and tell this Jeremy where he can go?"

She had stepped on my last nerve. She couldn't seem to understand someone like Jeremy, or she just didn't want to understand, especially since she was living high off the hog with her very successful attorney boyfriend, Otis Cox, the fancy 51-year old womanizer. He was playing her left and right. But she was the only one who could not see it. But yet she could jump down my throat about Jeremy's treatment of me.

"Janet, I can't figure you out!" I screamed with both hands gripping my hips.

"Because you are really one to talk! With things you have taken off of Otis Cox. Need I say? How would you feel if I put him down? How would you feel if I laid a trail of his dirt in your face? Could you stomach that?" I asked in a sharp tone. "And to think, you dumped a nice guy like Jimmie for someone like Otis."

She laughed in an uptight manner.

"Yeah, laugh! Because you wouldn't be if I started throwing some of his betrayal in your face.."

Her eyes widened and she forced laughter.

"Don't make me laugh. How in the world did Jimmie Tyler's name come up in this discussion? He's ancient history, and furthermore, not that this is any surprise to you, but when I was going out with Jimmie, all he really wanted was to be going out with you."

"But still, you and Jimmie never should have broken up," I said sincerely.

"That was back in high school and college. Too long ago to even think about. But anyway, it's funny how you think I should have stayed with Jimmie. You just dumped the guy yourself. So it seems mighty strange - that if you think he is so wonderful, why didn't you want him? And besides," she paused in my eyes. There's no comparing. Otis is an upstanding attorney," she stumbled with her words, between couching.

"Okay, maybe he is, but he's also a whore!" I caught my mouth with both hands. That had slipped out. She had gotten me so ticked.

"I'm sorry, Janet. I didn't mean for that to slip out," I touched her shoulder.

She looked at me and rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, you meant it," she said sadly, as the proud look vanished from her face. "Maryann, you're only saying that about Otis cause you know you're out of your head dating this Jeremy. I don't know why in the world you couldn't give Freddie Larson a chance. Oh! No!! You couldn't say yes to him. You had to go and hook up with the likes of Jeremy Tellis, so you could get dumped on! Seems like you have some kind of death wish to make yourself as miserable as possible."

I glanced around and Dad was standing in the doorway looking at us trying to see what the shouting was about.

"What are you two cutting up in here about this time. Put you two in a room together for more than five minutes and you're like cats and dogs. Why can't you girls just try to agree to disagree sometimes?" he grumbled his suggestion - looking down, turning his back, shaking his head stepping back into the living room.

Janet looked toward Dad's back and waited until he was out of view. Then she looked at me, shook her head and rolled her eyes. It was plain to see that the statement I made about Otis had her boiling. She could dish it out, but she couldn't take it.

"Okay, Janet, if I'm out of my head for dating Jeremy, what's your excuse for dating Otis, since you are supposedly the sane one

here?"

"Look, Maryann, this is not about me! And it's not about Otis! It's about you! And this self-pity you are wallowing in. Yeah, I know that no one is perfect. But at least I'm not pretending about wanting Otis in my life! But can you say the same!" She paused, and shook her head at me. "And just want to say, that I have heard this before, and maybe Otis was a bit wild, chasing women before we started seeing each other, but he has left all that wildness behind him now! But you know what? Your Mr. Tellis is still garbage!" she screamed angrily.

"How can you call Jeremy garbage?"

"I can call him garbage because he works in garbage! He hangs with garbage! And he lives in garbage! Sounds like garbage to me!" She looked down her nose.

By the time she finished trashing Jeremy, my face was covered with tears. Cause, how could I fight her? How could I defend him to her. She would never understand that there is more to a person than their professional status or their street address, or the dollar signs in their checkbook. I had learned the hard way that none of those things really brought true happiness. And then, too, a lot of the things she said made sense. Jeremy and I were from different worlds.

She noticed my tears and swallowed hard, walking over near the sink where I stood and touched my arm. But I wiped my tears quickly and went on about setting the table. She pulled out a chair and took a seat at the dinner table. And by now we both hated ourselves for coming down on each other so hard.

"Oh, look, Maryann. I'm sorry. I just got carried away. I didn't mean to make you cry. God knows, you have shed enough tears for one lifetime." She paused down at the kitchen table, then looked at me with sad eyes. "But I just had to speak my mind. Because you have changed so much. You mope around inside hiding from the world, giving up on life, settling for some man who mistreats you. And I guess if I didn't love you so much, I would

keep my big mouth shut. And not always put my foot in my mouth where you are concerned"

"I know," I stepped over and patted her shoulder. "Just forget it. I know you mean well. Do you wanna stay for dinner? I can put out another plate," I asked in a low, sad voice.

"No, I think I better leave," she mumbled as she rushed up from the table - grabbing her coat and scarf from the coat rack.

"I'll see you later," she said sadly, hurrying out of the kitchen.

It was half past midnight, as I tossed and turned in my bed. My pillows were soaked with tears that wouldn't stop falling. My mind couldn't erase the awful thoughts Janet had filled my head with. And around 12:45 am there was a light knock at the back door. I hopped out of bed and grabbed my robe. It could only be Jeremy, who was four hours late. As usual, he hadn't shown up at the time he had said.

I stretched the back door open, fuming with anger, waiting to look into his face, but he wasn't standing there. He was getting something from the trunk of his car. It looked to be a large box of some sort.

"Hey. How you feeling?" He glanced over his shoulder. "From the looks of it you gave up on me and hit the sack," he smiled. "I know I'm seriously late. But I got stuck in traffic. I'll be right there. It's a real snowy mess out here, and it's not letting up!" he hollered.

The snow was still coming down. So at least the thought of not having to get up for work eased my mind a bit after knowing I was going to be up half the night with Jeremy.

He hurried through the door carrying the big white box. My eyes widened and a slight smile came to my sad face as he placed the box on the kitchen counter and patted it with his right hand.

"I guess you are wondering what this could be? Just feast your eyes on this," he smiled - pulling a long blue winter coat from the box.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Maryann. You probably thought I had forgotten you, huh?" he grinned and kissed the side of my face.

Totally speechless. No words would come to me as I stood in the middle of the kitchen floor with an ever widening smile across my face. Because I was all set to let him have it for showing up late again and again, and now out of the blue he shows up with a Valentine's gift for me.

After modeling my coat for him, he hurried outside into the back driveway, leaving the door stretched open as all that bitter cold wind swept through the kitchen. I walked over and stood in the open door with my arms wrapped around me, shivering from the whispering winds, as he stepped to his car and grabbed a pint of Johnny Walker Red Whiskey from the glove department, turning the bottle up to his lips before stepping back inside.

He strolled back inside, closed the door, smiling and shaking his head, making a big frown from the strong booze and the bitterness of the cold. "Girl! That weather is kicking ass tonight. I hope my car starts tomorrow and don't give me no damn shit like it did this morning."

I stood near the stove, shaking my head. "I'm sure it will start. It's not even as cold as it was last night anyway."

"Well it damn sure feels like it. Why don't you stick your head out there and see for yourself, or better yet, walk out to my car and back and see if your ears are not half frozen by the time you step back inside," he grinned, taking another swallow of whiskey, making a face as if it tasted like something awful.

I shook my head as we stared at each other. "Why even drink that mess?"

"What?" he chuckled, taking a seat at the table.

"I just mean, why drink that hard liquor if it's going to cause you to make a face like that?"

"But it goes down so good," he grinned, extending the bottle toward me.

I shook my head and he turned the bottle back up to his lips,

and by the time he lowered it, the bottle was half empty.

"Jeremy, what are you trying to do? Get drunk before you get over here? Are you trying to become what your parents are?" I grabbed my mouth, that mean statement had slipped out.

"Cold blow, Maryann," he flashed me a not-too-pleased look.

"I know. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. Really I didn't. It's just that you're drinking that stuff like it's water, like it's going out of business or something," I humbly explained.

"I know. I've had enough. It's just so cold out there, Girl. I needed something to heat me up," he grinned, sticking the bottle in his coat pocket.

"I see," I asked with just a tinge of irritation in my voice, not too pleased about seeing him down half a bottle of whiskey right in my face.

A few minutes later, I made a plate of food for him. A regular routine whenever he dropped by, he was always hungry. He had mentioned that my food was his only home cooking, because his Mom, Birdie, was never sober enough to cook. So I heated up a bowl of chicken stew and some biscuits.

"Maryann, you are a great cook, woman. I love your cooking," he grinned, giving me a sexy look as I leaned my back against the counter.

"But you know what I'm dying for even more." He winked.

Suddenly those words and that look on his face triggered all the hurt and confusion I had been feeling earlier.

"So you like my cooking and my sex? If you could get it! Right? And I guess not nothing more!" I mashed my cigarette into the ashtray angrily.

My pissed attitude caught him off guard and he dropped his spoon - it hit the edge of the bowl and bounced off the table and hit the floor and he jumped out of his seat.

"Damn it! Now what's eating you? You made me drop my spoon," he cursed - reaching down to pick up the spoon.

"You heard me, Jeremy!" I snapped angrily.

"Yeah, I did. But what I don't get is why are you coming out of a bag all of a sudden. A few minutes ago you were all smiles and grinning over that coat right there." He pointed at the coat. "That cost me a pretty penny, I might add," he strongly relayed.

I grabbed the coat from the back of the kitchen chair and threw it at him, causing it to spill his soup and soil the coat.

"I don't want your damn coat! Give it to the bitch you're seeing days!" I shouted.

Before I could say another word, he had strutted over and cornered me between the refrigerator and the microwave cart.

"What's your damn problem, woman?" he pinned himself against me and as I struggled to break from his embrace, he only held me tighter.

"Let me go! Let me go! And get the hell out! And take that rag with you. I don't need anything from you, okay!" I hollered in his face.

He wrapped me in his arms and tightened his grip around my waist, and within seconds he was lowering me down to the shiny waxed floor.

"What do you think you are doing? Are you drunk or what?" I continued to struggle, trying to break free of his grip.

"No, I'm not drunk. I just happen to know what you need. And believe me - it's coming your way. After tonight you will be pretty sore. Your virginity will be history! he breathed against my neck. "Don't you think it's about time you gave me some of that?"

The struggle had undoubtedly turned him on, but I didn't share his desire. And just as he almost lowered me to the floor, Dad called my name.

"Maryann! Maryann. What's going on in there? Are you okay? he hollered from his room.

There was a bit of silence as Jeremy released me and stepped away - heading toward the door.

"Yes, I'm fine. It's just Jeremy. But he's leaving now. I'm sorry we woke you up," I hollered, straightening my robe and hair.

When I looked at Jeremy, he gave me a sharp look and grabbed the doorknob swinging the door open. He stepped outside and slammed the door hard behind him. And that ticked me off even more, knowing that loud noise would bother Dad. I grabbed the coat and threw it out behind him.

"Take your damn coat with you!" I yelled out the door. But he had already jumped in his black Buick Skylark and was backing out of the driveway.

That Saturday night Jeremy showed up at 11:40 pm. As usual, he could never show up at a decent hour. It was always when everything was closed. He was apparently having his fun, then coming to me hoping for possible sexual satisfaction. But I kept giving him the benefit of the doubt, because somehow I felt I didn't deserve any better.

Jeremy and I didn't seem to have anything in common, and except for his charm, he seemed to be all hot air. And on more than one occasion, I had heard him mention some pretty weird sexual fantasies.

He was 5 feet 9 inches, stocky, 210 pounds of solid muscle. He was heavy into body building. And it showed well on his solid built frame. His eyes were the color of nutmeg and his skin was the color of toasted honey.

He banged on the back door for almost ten minutes before he woke up Daddy, who let him in.

"Maryann is asleep I guess, son. Do you want me to wake her?" Dad grumbled, not sounding too pleased about being awakened from his sleep.

Jeremy didn't answer as I heard Dad's footsteps walking down the hardwood hallway toward my room.

"Maryann, Maryann. Jeremy is here." He knocked a couple times on my bedroom door.

"Okay, I'll be right there," I clenched my teeth.

I wasn't ready to face him again, after the big fight we had just had the night before. But I figured I should, just to set him

straight. And when I made it to the kitchen wearing my long blue satin robe, Dad had gone back to his room. Jeremy was standing there with a pitiful look on his face and his eyes registered some sincerity. But he had a beer bottle in his hand and it was plain to see that he had been drinking. But before I could say a word, he threw up both hands and shook his head. A second later, he placed the beer bottle on the table and slipped out of his coat, placing it across a kitchen chair.

"I was wrong. I'm sorry about everything," he uttered sincerely, taking off his cap to me.

"Girl, I still don't know what we were fighting about. But whatever it was, I'm sorry. You are the best thing that ever happened to me. You bring out everything that's good in me," he said with a distant look in his eyes - sort of staring toward the kitchen wall.

"Without you," he looked toward me and smiled. "I would have to face a bitter truth in a cruel world." He stared at me for a second and grinned.

"Now could you please plant those luscious lips on me and let's make up," he asked - walking toward me, he pulled me in his arms and kissed me urgently. Then his mouth traveled to my left ear and kissed me there, whispering in my ear.

"I want to screw you, Girl.

"Jeremy. Your choice of words got to go. Don't say it like that."

"Well, what's the difference whether I say make love or screw? It's all the same, and I'm not getting any. Don't you think it's about time? How long are you planning on driving me crazy putting me off like this? Plus how can you keep putting yourself off? I want that body, Maryann," he begged.

"Well, just let me touch it."

"What do you mean by that, Jeremy?"

"I mean I'll just put my hand inside of your panties and softly, gently massage you with my fingers. You'll love it, Maryann,

not to mention how elated my fingers will be," he said in a low, heated tone.

I paused in his lustful eyes for a second, and even though his words had aroused me, I shook my head, no.

"No, Jeremy," I said - pushing his face from mine.

"We won't be going all the way no time soon. I just can't make love with you. I just can't! Something is missing from this relationship! And until I figure out what, the only sex we're going to have is in our heads," I said seriously in his eyes and folded my lips.

"Okay, if that's the way you want it," he mumbled in a snappy manner - grabbing his coat.

"I'm leaving, Maryann. There's no reason to hang around here any longer. You and your damn hang-ups are too much to stomach. I guess you are planning to keep that ass of yours until the day you croak," he mumbled disappointedly.

"Jeremy, why do I have this feeling in the pit of my stomach, telling me that you only come around here when you're ready for sex? And you know what? Maybe that's why you're not getting any here!" I looked at him, shaking my head.

"And have you ever stopped to think about your nasty mouth? Cause for some man who claims to care so much and who wants me to put out so much! Where is your respect for me, Jeremy? Do you think I enjoy listening to all the filth out of your mouth?" I shouted harshly.

"And another thing. While I'm lying it on thick!" I pointed my finger at him. You never take me anywhere or around your friends and family. At first I thought that maybe you didn't like to go out - but I soon ditched that idea after you started coming over and telling me time and time again how you had just gotten in from hanging out with the guys. So tell me, why is it that you can find the time to hang out with the guys, but never with me? Why is that Jeremy? Are you ashamed of me? Is it because of my clothing?" I asked seriously, in a calmer voice. Do you think they'll make jokes

at the fact that I always wear black?"

"I don't want to hear no shit like that. Don't be silly. I'm not ashamed of you. Hell, if I was, I wouldn't even be over here. What kind of question is that to ask me anyway?" he said sharply - throwing his coat back across the kitchen chair.

"Well, if that's so. Explain why is it that you never take me anywhere? And you're only around when you're looking for sex! Why is that? Am I just a sidekick to you? A stop along the way? Another roll in the hay - that you're trying to obtain?" I said angrily.

He snatched his cap off the table. "You already know the damn answer to that. Girl, we have been over this same subject a hundred times. And to be frank, I'm sick of hearing the same old bull-shit!" he said sharply - grabbing his coat again, stepping toward the door.

"Well, think about it, Jeremy. You keep hearing the same thing as you say, because for the last six months since we have been seeing each other, you have yet! I mean yet! To take me out somewhere or around your friends! At times I feel so close to you, Jeremy," I paused and looked away. "But mostly, it's like we're worlds apart," I said sadly - as a tear trickled down my face.

"I'm not ashamed of you, Maryann, I'm ashamed of myself," he yelled as his eyes became watery. "Very ashamed of my own lousy ass in more ways than you could ever imagine."

"What? Run that by me again. You're ashamed of yourself?" I asked, puzzled at his confession.

"Now why are you looking so surprised to hear me say that? I'm sure you have been hearing the same thing from all your high class friends. I'm pretty sure they have trashed me! Telling you how I'm not good enough for you!

"I'm stuck, Maryann. I'm stuck like shit on a stick! And you know how long I've been stuck with this nowhere job? Too damn long. Hell! I've been picking up garbage everyday since I have been old enough to work! And that's been too many years. I don't even dare to say. So this is it for me! Picking up shit and

moonlighting as a bartender! Take your pick! Either profession is shit!" he held out both arms.

I stared on, surprised at his sudden put down. He was acting totally out of character, and his eyes were filled with confusion, as if there was so much upheaval inside of him, it was about to erupt.

Jeremy, please! Enough! Already! All of a sudden, you have decided to retaliate against yourself, stating that your profession has you in a shameful dilemma! The way you are talking is ludicrous! Everything you're saying sounds like a bunch of bull!"

"No! Maryann, that's where you are wrong. Because I don't have a profession! And that's the problem! This is all you're gonna get. I'll never go to work in one of those elite offices. I'm not educated enough," he uttered seriously as a permanent frown covered his face.

"Jeremy, why are you letting this bother you? I thought you knew me better. But I guess you don't. Because you should have known that I don't care about what you do for a living. I don't care about material things anymore. If I still thought that way - you wouldn't be here. The fact that you are a garbage man, so you say. A city worker, doesn't bother me. Why should it? There's nothing wrong with working for the city. Some people would give their arm and leg to have a city job," I paused, looking deep into his distant eyes.

"All I'm saying, Maryann, is that you got out there and made things happen. You went to college and made something of yourself. And you did it at a young age, just as I had planned to do. Here you are what?" he stared at me. Only 26 years old and you have a decent, respectable job. One you can be proud of," he nodded. "Girl, you could leave Illinois and find a job in any state or anywhere in the world. I just wish I could do the same. I wanted my dream, Maryann. I wanted to be a teacher maybe," he paused.

"So you wanted to teach? Or you thought about teaching at one time?" I asked.

Well, "I'm not sure. Anything except working in other

people's filth all day. Cause, I tell you, Maryann, I didn't figure on spending my whole life picking up garbage. But as many things in life, it just happened one day. I was hired right out of high school and I have been working in dirt ever since," he stated with a frown, snatching his cigarettes from his coat pocket, ripping off the plastic.

I took a seat at the kitchen table and started to bite my nails, as I searched his face and watched his expression. His degrading conversation was starting to really irritate me. Seemed as if he was trying to convince himself that he hated his job more than he was trying to convince me.

"Could you make things crystal clear, Jeremy. Tell me what point was I supposed to get?" I asked.

"The point that I'm afraid of losing you," he said, quickly, with a half sad smile.

I paused, for a second in his eyes, because his words sounded more like a question than a statement. But I wrapped my arms around him and gazed straight in his eyes and nodded.

He soon left and I was able to have a peaceful night's sleep.

My week was turning out much better than I had thought. All the snow had melted and even though it had rained six hours straight, it was now clear and sunny. Yet it was very cold as usual, for a typical February day. But I had been smiling and singing for two nights cause when Jeremy left my house that Saturday night, I felt better about things. I felt so much closer to him. We had poured our hearts and souls out to each other. We finally had an understanding of his treatment toward me. Now that it was in the open, things would be better.

Later in the evening at first dark, Jeremy stopped over. Daddy had just left for bowling. I was sitting on the carpet in front of the fireplace roasting marshmallows, hoping he would call or stop by. And when I heard his car engine pull up in the driveway, I jumped up off the living room floor and headed toward the kitchen to let him in. But before I reached the back door, he was knocking on the front door, which was a first for him. He had never knocked

on my front door since our courtship.

I pulled open the door with a big grin on my face. But he half smiled at me with an unusually serious look in his eyes. The moment he walked through the door, I quickly closed it and threw my arms around him.

"I missed you. I adore you for who and what you are. Not for what you do. I adore you and I want to be with you. But before this discussion goes any further, I just need you to answer one question," I said seriously and paused.

I waited anxiously for about a minute. But I still hadn't gotten the nerve to ask him what I wanted to ask.

"Well, what's the question? I can't answer it until I know what it is," he grinned.

I quickly turned my back to him and blurted it out.

"Do you love me?"

He turned me facing him, giving the longest stare and nodded.

"Yes. I do love you. But?" He held up one finger. But I quickly uttered before he could continue.

"If you love me, there is no but. Marry me. Let's get married, Jeremy. Because I don't care what anybody else thinks or says. My happiness lies with you. Loving you and spending the rest of my life with you is all that I want and desire."

"Maryann, I'm sorry," he said and turned his back.

Something sharp pinched my insides; suddenly I felt anxious with wonderment. What was going on? What was he trying to say? I paused for a second as he stood there with his back to me. And when he looked around our eyes locked..

"You're sorry you can't marry me or you're sorry what?" I asked nervously, with both hands covering my cheeks.

He paused before he spoke, looked at me with water-filled eyes. The expression on his face made my heart pound faster.

"Both, Maryann," he said.

I stumbled with my words. "What? What you mean both?

What are you saying, Jeremy? What is it?" I grabbed both cheeks, thinking how I could kick myself for mentioning marriage.

"I guess I spoke out of turn. It's clear you're not the least bit interested in walking down the aisle at this time. And believe me. I'm not trying to rush you. Really I'm not! It just came out. But I can see how uncomfortable it makes you. So just forget I mentioned it," I said, trying to release the pressure, if the idea of marriage had frightened him.

I stared in his face and my words seemed to stab him right in the heart. But why? What had I said that had brought forth so much pain - that would cause his eyes to water? And whatever it was, I didn't want to hear it. My heart couldn't take anymore bad news.

"Just stop it right there. I don't think I like the way this conversation is headed. And I think I know why. But Jeremy, if you'll just listen for a moment, I can solve that problem," I explained unbuttoning my blouse.

He shook his head, "What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm doing what I should've done long before now. I'm getting ready to undress for you. I'm ready Jeremy," I smiled at him nervously as my fingers slightly shivered removing the last button from its socket.

He stood there with his mouth open and his eyes widened and glued to my black lace bra, as I slipped my blouse off my shoulders. And when my blouse hit the rug, I could see how his face flushed and his eyes lit up with desire as they roamed over the length of my bare shoulders, then focusing to my full breast, as my full round nipples were bursting against my silky bra. And just the thought of what I was doing caused tantalizing warmth to rip right through me. And the look on his face was that of raw passion that I had never seen on his face before.

"I'll show you, Jeremy. I'm ready. This is what I should have allowed myself to do weeks ago. And I'm ready now. Yes! Believe me, I am," I assured him in a low, shaky voice, as his eyes

were focused right between my bosom.

"Because, Jeremy, I do adore you, and I know I haven't been forthcoming and things just haven't been what they could between us. But I want to make things right, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you," I explained with a nervous tremble to my voice as my hands shivered noticeably pulling down and stepping out of my long black skirt.

Now I was standing before him wearing only my bra and bikini panties. And needless to say, I felt quite embarrassed and out of place, since I had never striped down to my underpants for anyone, and my heart had never really wanted to except for Cooper, who never gave me that privilege. But I was determined to convince Jeremy that I could give in to him, and at the same time I was trying to convince myself. But as I stood there, he just gazed at me as if he could be knocked right over with a feather. He was wordless. Motionless. Then I slowly stepped toward him and put my arms around him, tiptoeing to place my mouth against his. And his lips quivered against mine.

"Let's go to my room. Daddy isn't home. We have the entire house to ourselves. Now what do you think of that? Believe me, Jeremy, we can make this relationship work." I gazed into his eyes more nervous than I had ever been.

Before I could blink, he gripped my face in an urgent, forceful manner and pushed his tongue in my mouth, kissing me deep in a hungry, desperate way, wildly massaging my hair as he moved his tongue around in my mouth, then brought his demanding tongue outside of my mouth and licked and sucked my lips. But within seconds, he pulled away, grabbed a handkerchief from his coat pocket and wiped the lipstick from his mouth, making two steps backward, shaking his head, grabbing his hands, squeezing them tight as they trembled.

"I can't do this, Maryann," he uttered in a shaky voice.

"Of course you can. This is what you have been asking me for forever. Remember. Now you can have it."

He turned his back to me, "Maryann, don't!"

"What you mean, Maryann don't? This is what you have asked for left and right. Now I'm standing here half naked and you're turning your back?"

"That's right, Girl. Because I know you're just putting on an act. You are no more ready right now than you were the last time I asked you. You are just doing this because you think I'm disappointed with this relationship because you don't put out. But you are nowhere near the mark," he explained in a sad tone, turning around, not focusing on me, quickly grabbing up my skirt and blouse, handing them to me.

"Put your clothes back on, Maryann. Please! Please!" he paused and glanced down at the carpet. "But by no means get me wrong. I would love to get down on my knees in front of you and rip those shiny black panties off of you with my mouth and have you right here and now. Cause God knows I have craved for what's in those drawers of yours, and I have dreamed about being between your luscious legs," he paused in my eyes. "And I guess I should say, excuse my usual frankness, but I have wanted to get between your legs from the moment you told me you had never been had. And seeing you standing here like this is taking all of my will power to remain civilized."

"I'm confused, Jeremy. I don't understand. Cause if you have craved me so and lost so much sleep over finally making love with me, what's the problem now?"

"That's what I'm trying to get to now. You see, Maryann, in the light of everything, it wouldn't be right. And believe me, there was a time in my life when I would've just thrown doing the right thing right out the window. But in this case I can't. I won't!" he grabbed his neck and frowned up at the ceiling, shaking his head.

He focused his eyes back on mine as I stepped back into my skirt and buttoned my blouse, "Believe me, it's not about you holding back. It's about me holding back."

"Maryann, there's something I have to tell you. I haven't

been completely honest with you about everything..":

"But last night you just poured your heart out to me. If that wasn't being completely honest, what is?" I asked.

"Yes. I know. All that was the truth. But I neglected to mention one very important part of my actions toward you," he uttered sadly and dropped his head.

I threw my arms around his waist and placed my face against his chest.

"Jeremy, please! It doesn't matter. What matters is that we love each other. Don't say anymore. Please! Your reactions and the sound of your voice is making me nervous."

He slightly shoved me away, taking two steps backward, "I'm sorry. But you must be told. And it has to be by me. And it has to be now!"

When he uttered those words, my heart skipped a beat. I grabbed my ears and turned my back. Something told me - what he had to say was more than I was ready to hear.

"No! Jeremy! Don't do this! Please don't."

He grabbed my shoulders and turned me facing him.

"Listen! Will you please let me say what I'm trying so hard to say to you? This is not easy for me." He glanced down and looked away for a second. "Because I do love you. But, what I was trying to say, and what I should have said long before now, but I was too selfish and confused to do so. But I can say it now. I'm not confused or unsure anymore. And what I'm trying to say here, Maryann, is what we have is not enough. It's just not enough for me, Maryann. I'm sorry," he shook his head.

His words were like a cold hard slap in the face. I struggled to speak after the longest pause.

"But you just said you love me. And why isn't our love for each other enough?" I asked sadly, as I couldn't hold my tears.

"Yes. I know I said I love you," he gripped my shoulders. "And I do mean it. But, Maryann, I have come to realize that I love someone else more."

He now had my utmost attention. For I was totally stunned, grabbed my face, shaking my head, looking in his eyes, waiting for the next bomb to drop.

"For you see, I'm not just that guy you dream about. I'm also the guy your brother dreams about. And I dream about him too. In case you haven't figured it out, Maryann, I'm gay; and the person I truly love is Paul. And I can't marry you. Because I plan to marry him," he said with a nervous quiver to his voice.

I stood there staring at him, but I couldn't speak. My voice had abandoned me, as I struggled to catch my breath. His words hit me like a quick, hard punch in the stomach. Then suddenly I shook my head at him, "Jeremy! You are telling me that you are in love with my brother? You conniving, two-timing bastard!" I shouted angrily as rage boiled inside of me and I wanted to throw something at him or kick something. But I just continued to shout. Well! My God! When and how did this shit occur? Or have you always been a Homo! Queer! Or whatever you are?" I grabbed my face and squeezed it, before I let out the loudest scream, "Damn you!"

He stepped toward me and touched my arm with the most torn expression on his face.

"Let me explain, Maryann. It's not that simple. I love Paul, yes." He paused and touched my cheek, looking straight into my eyes.

"But I also love you. And you have to believe me when I say it's been driving me crazy!"

I stepped backward, shaking my head. Speechless. My watery eyes stayed glued to his.

"For the last six months I have been spending all my free time with him and all my free nights with you, trying to decide which one of you I love more."

I turned my back to him and gripped my hands, staring into space. I felt like I was tossing and turning from a nightmare that I couldn't awaken from. And as he continued to speak, salty tears dripped from the tip of my nose to my lips.

"Maryann, I know that sounds awful. And you probably want to pull out a gun and shoot me by now. But it's the gospel truth. I fought with this decision long and hard. I thought it would be you! I wanted it to be you! It would have saved me a lot of hassle!" He rubbed his left eye and buttoned his long, black wool coat.

"So choosing me would have saved Mr. two-timing some hassles! I see!" I screamed bitterly.

"I didn't mean it that way, Maryann. Choosing you would have been wonderful. But yes! It would have made things a lot easier."

"What things easier, Jeremy? Are we talking about how society frowns on homosexuality! Is that the thing you're referring to?" I asked coldly, leaning against the stereo stand.

He didn't bat an eye as he nodded and answered with a sharp tongue. "Yes! That thing Maryann; but you see, even knowing what I was up against - the feelings I had for your brother were greater than any kind of fear I had of what others could ever say or think. And I just figured it all out recently. But in the meantime, Paul and I were not sleeping together! Only last week did I decide for sure." He paused. "But since that time, we have always used protection."

"So now! On top of all this damn humiliation of being dumped by a man who's bi-sexual and in love with my brother! I also have to worry about what if we had slept together - AIDS!" I yelled teary-eyed shaking my finger at him. "And to think, I was a fool enough to stand here, just a few minutes ago and pull my clothes off for you."

"Believe me, Maryann. We are very well aware of the AIDS scare! And all the other shit out there that could destroy our bodies and lives! Give me a break, and a bit of credit for something. Hell, I wasn't born yesterday. And another thing, Maryann, I think you should take a look deep into your heart. Because you're saying you love me. But deep down where it counts I don't think you do. Because if you truly loved me as you say, you would have been able

to share yourself with me.

While he was talking to me, I could see and hear him, but couldn't believe it was all happening. It was painful enough to hear that he didn't love me enough, let alone, hearing he's gay and in love with my little brother; and not to mention swallowing a second shock of Paul being gay too. Too much crushing news in one evening. I thought I would burst with disappointment and shock as my stomach boiled over with shooting pains. There were many mysterious things about Jeremy. But never in my wildest dreams would I have figured him to be bi-sexual.

"After the way you explained yourself to me and all the self-pity and shame you had to get over, now this? Why did you even bother to explain things to me the other night if you knew it was coming to this? Because, Jeremy, that open conversation is what really made me feel as if we really had a go at things," I explained without shouting.

He glanced down at the floor and back at me. "The other night was a performance. The performance of my life. I'm not proud of the lies I fed you, but I felt they were necessary at the time," he explained in an even tone, holding out his arms.

"You get more and more disgusting by the minute!" I screamed, shaking my finger at him. "Do you think I'm dense or what?" I paused and caught my breath, almost choked up. He had just stabbed me with another deception.

"Do I look like a moron? Nitwit? Dumbbell? Blockhead? or what? Because you must think I'm one. You're standing here telling me now that everything you told me the other night was a pack of filthy rotten lies! And it was okay to tell me those lies - because you were trying to get your head together!" I yelled, angrily and coughed a couple times.

"Yes! Maryann. I was desperate to keep you in the dark about my double live, until I knew for sure which way I was going to flat out choose," he stated loudly in a sorrowful way.

"Jeremy! Who in the hell are you? I don't even know you

at all!" I threw up my hands, shaking my head. "I can't believe you took me for such a brainless sucker! Feeding me all those lies!"

"I hate myself, Maryann, that's why I don't take you anywhere, Maryann. I threw my life away on a nowhere job, Maryann. I didn't want you to mingle with my loser friends, Maryann!"

I hollered, grabbing my cheeks, "I was such a dummy to buy into those lies! I know it didn't ring quite right, but I was so gullible and needy that I bought those lies!" I covered my eyes, crying. But only for a second.

All of a sudden, something clicked inside of me. My heavy heart started beating very fast, my face heated and sudden, outrageous fury boiled inside of me. It was like a raging storm in me, bursting to come out. And with the blink of an eye, I started grabbing magazines and newspapers from the coffee table throwing them at him, then glanced around and spotted something heavier, a Sears catalog that was lying on the sofa and sailed it with all my strength across the room at him. He threw up one arm trying to duck and block the book, but it landed against the side of his head.

"Wait a minute! Maryann. You gonna hurt somebody, throwing this shit!"

"That's what I'm trying to do, you inconsiderate, unorthodox bastard!" I yelled, running into him, swinging flat hand licks to his chest, as he was trying to shove me away with both hands. But I kept throwing licks, until I managed to tighten one hand and sock a demanding smack to the side of his face.

He managed to grab my left hand, screaming, "Maryann! Calm down! Stop it now! Girl! All this hitting isn't getting us anywhere! I was an ass, and I have admitted it! And now you'll be better off without me! So just please get a hold of yourself!" he demanded sharply.

But I kept swinging licks with my right hand, managing a meaningful slap across his nose. And just like that, he grabbed both of my hands forcefully, holding them tight to stop the licks.

"Please! Please! Please! Maryann! Calm down! Please!" he hollered.

I jerked my hands away from him, stepping backward, grabbing my cheek, trying to catch my breath and collect myself.

"Maryann," he uttered sadly and forced me back into reality.

"Maryann. Are you okay? Hope you are. Cause I think I have explained everything and said what I have to say. And I think I should leave."

I nodded, "yes." Then yelled.

"Wait a minute! Not so quick! There's a couple questions I need you to answer."

"Okay, whatever. I'll answer anything you want to know," he uttered sadly, looking toward the window.

"Does little brother know about you and I, and all we have been to each other?" I asked.

"Yeah, he has known from the beginning," he answered with head lowered and paused, then looked me straight in the face.

"When you and I first started seeing each other, Paul and I started seeing each other after being introduced by you." He paused again.

There was the longest pause of silence as he looked toward the window before continuing.

"That's how it happened, Maryann. I'm sorry. Cause I know how that must sound to you. But you want and deserve the truth! And I'm giving it to you. Your brother and I clicked when we first looked into each other's eyes. We fell hard for each other on the spot. That's why I suggested he find his own place and move out. Figured that would be the best thing until I could choose. That's why I couldn't take you out in public to meet any of my friends or associates, because they have all met him. And I just didn't want any problems with you finding out about my double life."

"Okay, Jeremy! I have heard quite enough!" I stepped over to the living room window and pulled the curtains apart, closing them quickly and pointed toward the door.

"Plus we don't want to keep little brother waiting! I see him out there sitting in your truck," I said snapping, then screamed, "So get the hell out of my house! Now! While you can still walk, before I go and find my father's shotgun and blow both of your damn legs off!"

Silently, he shook his head before heading toward the front door. When his hand gripped the doorknob, a cold chill hit me. He turned and looked my way before stepping through and closing the door which I dashed an ashtray against the moment he slammed it shut. Dropping to my knees, covering my face - screaming at the top of my voice.

"No! No! No! I can't believe this! I can't believe this! Not Jeremy! Not my brother! Oh! God! Help me! Help me please! Why did he have to fall for my brother? Why did he have to be gay?

I jumped off the sofa from the clear sound of footsteps on the porch, then the turning of the doorknob. I stood straight up and wiped my eyes, glancing around the room to make sure I had put everything back in place, figuring it could only be Daddy getting home from his bowling game.

He stuck his key in the lock and before I could walk over and let him in, the phone rang. I grabbed the receiver to keep from making small talk with Dad. I didn't want to mention, and had no intentions of ever mentioning what had taken place with Jeremy. And especially the news about Paul.

"Hello," I answered in a low voice.

"Hi, it's me. What's wrong ? You sound sad," Janet asked.

"You're right. I am," I said in a very low voice, holding my hand over the receiver. Daddy was still moving around in the living room and I didn't want him to notice my sad, upset voice and manner.

"Well, what happened?" Janet asked loudly.

I didn't answer, because Dad was standing right beside me, trying to show me some photo he had taken with his bowling team.

"So I gather you can't talk right now," she replied softly.

"That's right," I said.

"I understand. I'll be right over if you say the word," Janet said.

"Yes. Please do," I said, in almost a whisper.

When I hung up the receiver, I glanced over my shoulder and noticed Dad sitting on the sofa looking at some photographs. I went to head toward my room, but he called my name before I could take four steps.

I turned around and forced myself to smile. I just wanted to scream and break something. My stomach felt like it was wrapped around in knots, and every few seconds the pain felt like a punch straight to my stomach. Jeremy's words kept ringing in my head.

"Come sit over here for a minute and take a look at these photographs. Allen gave us a hand tonight, after one of our regulars didn't show up," he said in a low voice.

I paused standing over Dad. "You mean Dr. Valentine, Cooper's Dad?" I asked, as my voice and my heart lit up at the thought of my father and Cooper's father socializing. I wanted them to become closer friends.

"Yeah, Maryann. That's the only Allen I know," Dad grinned, passing me a couple, as I flopped down beside him.

"Who took these pictures? They're pretty nice. You guys look like you're having fun," I said, all smiles as I could see Dr. Valentine standing next to Dad in each one.

"Rosemary had a camera with her. She took all the pictures. I think she took about forty pictures. This is only half of them. They kept the rest," Dad said smiling.

"So both of Cooper's parents were out at the bowling alley tonight. I'm glad they are getting out and enjoying themselves," I said.

"Well, yeah, they came to watch us play last week too. But it's about time, don't you think? That boy's been dead for eight years. Eight years is enough time for anybody to grieve over

anybody, and to try to go on with their life!"

His words hit home. He was so right. And I wondered if he said that more for my benefit. But I sort of stared out into space, and seconds later the doorbell rang. Then a knock.

I rushed off the sofa and hurried to answer the door, figuring it was Janet, and it was.

She stepped into the living room, noticing Dad on the sofa.

"How are you this evening, Mr. Brooks?" she asked.

"Just fine, dear. Just fine," Dad answered, glancing up with a smile, then buried his head right back into the pictures. He was having a ball looking at those photos. I never knew a few pictures could bring him so much joy.

Janet followed me to my room, and the moment we stepped inside I burst into tears. We both were seated on the love seat near the window. She patted my back.

"What happened?" she asked.

"You were right about Jeremy. He was just using me. He told me tonight that he's gay."

"He's what?"

"That he's gay. He came over around seven, while Daddy was still out bowling, and he told me all of this stuff.

"Maryann, I'm so sorry you're hurting like this. I never would have guessed. He doesn't fit the bill, from what you have told me about him."

"I know he doesn't. I'm out of my head here with confusion. But I didn't tell Daddy, and I don't plan to. I figured there's no need to get him upset too."

"Man, Oh, Man," Janet said, lighting up a cigarette, offering me one.

I took one of her cigarettes, lit it and took two puffs before tears were pouring down my cheeks again.

"When I told you to cut Jeremy loose, I said that because I knew you were not happy, and only pretending to be. And if pretending is too harsh of a word, I'll say fooling yourself to be," she

paused and took another drag on her cigarette. "But I never thought for one second that he was gay."

"Me either," I mumbled in somewhat of a daze.

"Well, tell me this, Maryann, what was his reason for suddenly being open with you about his sexuality?"

"He realized that he's in love with a man that he has been seeing. He said he loves this person more than he loves me," I said, but knew I couldn't reveal to her that it was my little brother.

"That really burns me. That two-timing bastard! Look, Maryann, just thank goodness that you're rid of him. You weren't in love with him anyway. So let him go have all the men he wants. Now you are free to get your life back on track. And girl, that's really what you need to do.

"Yeah, I know you're right. Plus Dad said something tonight that really hit home with me."

"You see, Sweetie, you got to stop beating yourself up over Cooper's fate, and you wouldn't end up in these kind of situations.

"I know you're right, Janet," I uttered sadly.

She nodded, "I know it's been a long, sad rocky road, since his death. And we have all missed him. Who wouldn't miss a sweetie and a cutie like him. Plus on top of all his talent and good looks, he had brains."

"Yeah, he did. Didn't he," I smiled, as her words about him soothed me.

"I mean smarts out of this world. You gotta remember, he was in my class, not yours. And he got straight A's on all his assignments. He was the only one out of my senior class to be accepted at the University of Chicago Medical School. So, yeah, he was a great loss to us and society. He probably would have ended up being the next top brain surgeon in this country.

I touched her arm, all excited about her conversation about Cooper.

"I bet he would have, because he didn't half do anything."

"But, Maryann, you got to let it go. And take your heart

back from a dead man. You got to look reality straight in the face. And you got to stand toe-to-toe with your problems and all this and wash it right out of your system.

"Because you know what? What good is it doing you? Think about it. Look where you came from. You had a fun-filled glorious upbringing. Now...."

Her words were cut off by a knock at my bedroom door, then Daddy hollered, "I'm on my way to Kentucky Fried Chicken. Do you girls want anything?"

I looked at Janet and she shook her head, "No, Dad we don't want anything. But thanks for asking," I hollered.

"Okay, I'm leaving now," he hollered.

Janet touched my arm as I continued to face her. "As I was saying, now think about where you have been over the past eight years, you have literally been through hell and back, because I have watched you take the trip. You would self-destruct, and in most cases just for the sake of hurting yourself. And maybe you're thinking how can I sit here and analyze your life. But Sweetie, I may not be a shrink. But it doesn't take one to see what you have been through. It rips me to shreds to see you so unhappy." She paused for a moment, looking down at the floor, shaking her head.

She raised her head and looked at me and smiled, "You know, girlfriend, it's time. Time for you to flush all that dark, bitterness right out - taking full control of your life again."

I walked Janet to the front door, and when she stepped out on the porch, she looked at me and smiled, "Think about what I said, Sweetie. Take back control, and you can start by ditching that black outfit you're wearing, and while you're at it - everything else you own in black."

After she left, my eyes were dry. The knots in my stomach had vanished, and there was a calm about me. Because I knew she was right, I had to take back control of my life. And suddenly, I felt like I needed to go somewhere and get a fresh start - in order to be able to do that.

PART FOUR: **"A PLACE IN THE SUN"**

Chapter Thirteen

It was just minutes after sunrise, on that peaceful Saturday morning in late April, 1994, when I arrived at Grandma Helen's estate in the heart of down home Columbus, Georgia. I pulled up in the driveway, stepped out of my blue Mustang and leaned up against it. Stretched my arms over my head, taking in the fresh, cool country air. It was great to have finally reached my destination. It had been a long, restless tiresome drive and it seemed as if I had been on the highway for days. I had to get far away from home and all the sad memories.

It was time to take a stand and take back control of my life. Just as Janet had told me a month ago. Georgia would be a fresh new beginning. Time to look forward to the future and let go of my dark past. Time to stop being self-destructive and wash out the guilt and bitterness. Time to face the facts, that I would never love the way I loved Cooper.

It was only 9:00 a.m. But I knew Grandma was probably up and about, sewing quilts or baking breads, or one of her other many

chores - that she does during her crack of dawn schedule. But if by slim chance she was still resting, I didn't want to interrupt her sleep.

I slipped out of my shoes and slowly walked barefoot through the cool, damp lawn and took a seat---on the long gray wooden porch, looking around at all the very familiar sights, enjoying the fresh morning breeze against my face.

I had always loved Grandma Helen's house, and how the old fresh smells never faded. Each of the ten rooms filled with the scent of fresh chopped pine logs. She lived in a huge Victorian style house. The large rooms were bright and sunny with lots of green hanging plants sweeping to the floor. The old yellow house was nearly 100 years old. Grandpa Jonas, as a little boy, had watched great grandpa Jonas build the old house plank by plank. The many coats of paint, now pale yellow, had faded and peeled with the years and dampness. The tall shade trees surrounded the front and back lawns always keeping the yards cool all summer long. The grounds were lined by bright yellow honeysuckle bushes and radiant red roses.

Everything looked the same, just as it had the year before. And the year before that. Driving down to visit every summer was always one of my most treasured events.

The first two weeks after my move to Grandma Helen's, it was very clear in my mind that I was 100 percent sure about sticking to my major promise to stay clear of relationships. The peace-of-mind of non-involvement had really worn well on me. I was convinced my heart couldn't give or receive love.

I was determined to no end - with no thoughts of knights in shining armor, no prince charming. Then the middle of June, right out of the blue it happened! He happened! Cameo white, the 41-year-old math instructor, who taught at the same college where I was hired, and who drove the little lime green blazer in the huge white house across the road from Grandma's.

Becoming his friend was the most wonderful, easiest, natural thing that ever happened to me. And before we had one conversation

together, I had noticed him cutting his front lawn, and the first thing that caught my eye was his striking resemblance to Freddie Larson. My heart skipped a beat. Had I traveled all those miles from home, just to run into one of the individuals I was hoping to stay clear of. Had fate dealt me the misfortune of moving next door to one man I had forced my heart to forget?

But as I watched him closely, sitting on the front porch that breezy, sunny day, I placed the magazine beside me on the swing and I concentrated more and when he waved at me and smiled, I got a better look at his face and then I was positive he wasn't Freddie. Because he didn't have that sexy smile and those sensuous eyes that used to mesmerize me whenever I was in Freddie's company. But one of the first things I asked him when he walked over and introduced himself, was did he have any relatives by the last name of "Larson," especially in the Chicago area, and he gave me a curious look and an uncomfortable smile, before shaking his head, "No," probably wondering why I had asked him that question.

"Hi, I'm Maryann. And I'm sorry for asking you such a question before we even introduced ourselves. But it's just that you bear such a striking resemblance to someone I know back home."

He nodded with a smile, "How you doing, Maryann? I'm Cameo," he extended his hand.

I hopped off the swing and shook his hand. We grinned at each other as he pulled off his cap and wiped his shirttail across his forehead. I couldn't stop smiling as I anxiously and nervously poured him a cold glass of lemonade that was sitting next to the old white wooden swing. Then I stood there smiling with both hands in the pockets of my long lavender sundress and watched as he turned the tall glass of ice-cold lemonade up to his mouth, drinking it all before lowering the glass.

He looked at me for a few seconds and smiled, handing me the glass, "Man, that was good! I needed that," he grinned, taking a seat on the front steps.

I walked down the steps past him - and I felt his eyes on me

as I stepped out into the yard. I felt nervous in his presence and I thought he was very cute. And I wondered what he thought of me, and would he ever ask me out. I knew right then and there that I wanted him to.

I looked around at him as he was still sitting there on the front steps - smiling and wiping his face with the long blue towel that was hanging across his shoulder. He soon stood up and walked back across the road to finish cutting his lawn.

He looked around and hollered as he made it half way across the road, "Thanks again for the lemonade."

"Sure, bye. Have fun cutting your grass," I smiled.

After he left, I walked back to the swing, and I continued to sit there, slowly swinging back and forth, in great wonder of my overwhelming admiration for him. For some reason, I felt something special for him and I didn't even know why. But something in the back of my mind kept telling me that the radiance I felt for him stemmed from his striking resemblance to Freddie.

On many occasions, after our meeting, I would find myself staring out of the living room window at him while he washed his blazer, cut his weeds, raked his grass and any other chores outdoors. And I found myself asking Grandma Helen questions about him from sun up to sun down. I couldn't hear enough. He was forever on my mind.

Grandma Helen told me how he moved across the road from her last year. He had left Boston after fifteen years, to come live in the house he was raised in, after his parents retired from their family-owned accounting firm and set up residence in Florida. Grandma Helen had been best friends with his parents, and said she remembered when he used to come visit them every summer before they retired and moved to Florida.

It had been nine and a half years since I had felt true love, deep within my soul lighting up my heart. This new sophisticated guy, Cameo White, had touched my heart and crumbled the stone that once existed inside of me. He didn't look like Cooper. He didn't

dress like Cooper. He didn't talk or sound like Cooper. He didn't smile or laugh like Cooper. He didn't tell the same kind of jokes as Cooper. But yet I felt that same comfort with him as I felt with Cooper.

Cooper's skin was like a copper-tone brown and smooth as silk, with the clearest baby green eyes that spoke a language of their own. Cameo's complexion was the exact shade of golden caramel, with shiny light brown eyes that sparkled in the dark. Cooper had 16-inch long, dark brown natural curls. And Cameo had 2-inch coal black waves.

Cooper stood 6 feet at 160 pounds. He wore cut out jeans, leather jackets and snake skin boots. Cameo stood 5' 11" at 165 pounds. He wore three-piece suits and ties with penney loafers.

Cooper loved a crowd and loud music and fast cars, and would only drink sparkling wine. But most of all, he loved being center stage and bringing down the house with his powerful voice. But just singing ranked neck-in-neck with his devotion and fascination of medicine. And his dedication to his medical career never took a back seat. He talked to me more about the concepts in anatomy and physiology and biochemistry than he did anything, it seems. He had the sharpest mind of anyone I knew, making all straight A's his first semester in medical school.

Cameo didn't care for crowds and he only went for soft music. He loved the outdoors and only drove blazers and vans. He wasn't a big drinker, just social, but he would drink anything. But most of all, he loved science and the magic of the stars and the sun. He told me more about the sun and the heavens than I ever learned in school. There was nothing about Cameo that reminded me of Cooper. They were as different as night and day, and yet they both shared the same huge flame -that kept my heart on fire - burning continuously without a pause. The same light that brightens up my world. One thing was identical. The love I felt for Cameo was as powerful and magical as I had felt for Cooper.

Waking every morning and getting dressed for work brought

new meaning to the word, "happiness," knowing the polite, soft-spoken, compassionate, friendly, good looking Cameo White would be sitting in the classroom across from me.

Getting to know him and being around him gave me back bits and pieces of a wounded heart, that had been broken beyond repair. That only true love could mend back together again. And that's what had happened. Loving him had bonded all the broken pieces. I was whole again.

Falling in love with him was like all of a sudden a black blindfold had been removed from my eyes. I could see clearly and my insides felt untangled and free of knots.

In just a matter of a few weeks, it was as if Cameo and I had known each other for years. I cried many times on his shoulders about my failed attempt to get married and losing my first love to suicide. And I also assured him how I wanted nothing more to do with relationships, not knowing at the time that he was going to be the one to cause me to be able to love again. But being with him seemed to melt all my negativeness and sadness.

It was like, I got out of bed one morning, and I felt as light as a feather, as if I could float. All the hurt and pain from my troubled life had been lifted off my shoulders. It had all disappeared and the only thing left was undeniable! Blissful! Love inside of me for Cameo. Everything was wonderful! Except one major problem! Cameo didn't share my feelings.

But I had one hope that I prayed by, and that was the fact that I had not seen any females coming and going from his house. So at least, he didn't seem to be attached. And with my bedroom window showing the entire view of his house, I had laid on my bed many nights looking through my sheer curtains, across the road to his house, crying myself to sleep, wishing he was with me.

It was a clear, crisp Saturday morning in August. Grandma Helen was busy as usual, in her favorite room in the house, the kitchen, making homemade apple jellies and blackberry jams. She canned all her jellies and jams during the summer and there were

usually always many jars to last all fall and winter long, and then during Christmas, she gave jars as gifts. And for as long as I could remember I had never seen a jar of store-bought jelly in Grandma Helen's house. And not only did she just can jellies and jams, she also canned her own pickles and sweet beets.

The berries, apples, honeysuckles and roses filled the warm, clean air. I had just received a letter from Janet. I was sitting on the front swing as I began to read my first letter from her since I had left Chicago:

August 10, 1995

Maryann Brooks
c/o Mrs. Helen Brooks
Route 2
Columbus, Georgia

Dear Maryann:

I hope this letter finds you and your grandmother doing well. So much has happened in my life since you moved down south. So much until I really don't know where to start. But let me start by saying, I really miss you. And I would have written sooner, but so much commotion has been going on in my life, that I'll tell you about later in the letter. And by-the-way, I received all four of your letters. And you know what, you didn't mention in any of your letters when you might come this way for a visit. Cause, like I said, I really miss you. Your Dad misses you too. I saw him yesterday outside cutting the lawn. I had just left my classroom, heading home. I slowed down, but I didn't stop, but I did wave at him. He waved back

at me and smiled. He looked the picture of health. Does he still have those back problems? Just wondering, cause if he does, he probably shouldn't be out cutting his own grass.

Oh, yes, I saw Mr. and Mrs. Valentine a couple days ago on State Street at Marshall Field's department store. They also looked the picture of health.

I tell you, Maryann, they are the best looking senior citizens I have ever seen. You know, they should have had more children to spread their beauty around. God knows Cooper was gorgeous. But anyway, I chatted with them for a few minutes. They asked about you, and said to tell you that "Sammie," Cooper's dog is doing fine after having five puppies. They offered me one, which I plan to pick up after they turn eight weeks. And they said to tell you - they're holding a puppy for you too.

Anyway, I was glad to see them and get a chance to talk to them for awhile. I plan to visit them soon. And I also plan to visit your Dad soon too.

Maryann, where does all the time go? It just seems to fly. Here I am only two months away from my 29th birthday and it seems as if my life just slipped through my fingers. I often think about all the fun and laughs we shared when we were all seniors in high school. Or should I restate that, and say when Cooper, Jimmie and I were seniors. And you a junior. Those were perfect years for us, me specially, when all my senior classmates chose me to be the homecoming queen. But twelve years and thirty pounds later, makes it all seem like a hundred years ago.

Yes, girlfriend, time has even turned our community into a lonely, empty neighborhood. Cause remember when we were back in school - how it was so lively and full of hope and warmth. The four of us had big dreams, and fun was our middle name. Yeah, those were the days for you, Cooper, Jimmie and I. We were best buddies, and thought nothing could destroy our perfect world as we knew it. But I guess nothing stays the same. First, Cooper ended up losing his precious life, at an incredible young age. And after he passed away, his beautiful lime-green brick home became a sore spot in our hearts. We couldn't bear to look at his house, it brought back too many memories of a time that had vanished into space. Then you, my dear friend, the beautiful, cheerful, fun-loving, whiz at spelling, who used to head all the spelling bees and who used to pick flowers from your own backyard to give to all your classmates on Mondays, literally self-destructed, not being able to live in your world without him, so you single handedly set out to destroy the world of others, giving up on love totally.

Anyway, so much for all the sad times. I'm about to give you a bit of good news. And what I'm about to tell you is something I never could have admitted to a few months ago. Okay, here goes, and you can write back and say, "I told you so" if you like, but it really doesn't matter because you were right about Otis. I caught him red-handed, unbeknownst to him, being the big whore that you said he was. Anyway, I finally saw his true colors - and on the evening that I was going to dump him, he dumped me. Can you believe it? I didn't get the satisfaction of telling that bastard to go and fly a

kite! Yes, girlfriend, he beat me to the punch. All this took place last month. But I didn't waste any tears over him.

But anyway, the good news is, not that being rid of Otis isn't good news, smile!! But here's the real, real good news. Jimmie and I finally found each other again. He asked me to dinner and I accepted, and it all started from there. He took me to the top of the Lake Point Tower building to the famous Cite' restaurant for dinner. And while sitting there in that fancy restaurant, memories flooded me about the time when Cooper lived in a fine apartment there. And anyway, afterward we went to see "The Bridges of Madison County." We both cried through the entire movie. It was really a great movie. So when you get a chance, go see it. Maybe take your grandmother along, cause I'm sure she would really enjoy it too. Cause the main character is a senior citizen by the time the movie ends.

But listen girl, all during dinner and all during the movie, I had this incredible urge for Jimmie to kiss me. The chemistry between us was overwhelming. And the look in his eyes and his manner told me that he felt the same as me. And we kissed at my door, and knew after that one kiss that we were meant to be together. Anyway, we plan to be married on Saturday, October 22, my birthday. Everyday since he asked me, I have to pinch myself to make sure I'm not dreaming. I can't believe it, so I'm sure this is all very incredible to you. But as incredible as it is, I know you wish us well.

Maryann, I just want you to know that we are very assured in each other's love. And we were just talking about how much we love you and hope

you will soon find love again. My advice to you, Sweetie, is to just let go of the past and start looking toward the future.

Maryann, I almost forgot to tell you, that Jimmie finally landed himself a decent job. He was hired three months ago as a department head for J.C. Penney. Isn't that wonderful? And just yesterday he went out and bought himself a brand new shiny black 1995 Cadillac, finally junking that old green pickup he had been driving around in for the last ten years.

I love you always.

Sincerely, Janet

P.S.: Write back soon. And tell your grandmother I said hello.

After reading Janet's letter, I started crying. She just didn't know. I had found love again, but my new love didn't love me. I was so happy to hear from her. And so very happy that she and Jimmie had found their way back to each other. But at the same time, her letter had made me very sad, hearing about their happiness and new-found love, and realizing my happiness was still just a dream. A dream that still seemed impossible.

After awhile, I dried my tears with my fingers, and once more my sad eyes were glued to his front yard. But then I thought, what good was it doing me to sit out on the front porch and wish he walked over when his car hadn't been in his driveway all morning.

I sat on the swing, swinging back and forth for ten minutes more, but after no sign of Cameo, I decided to take a walk out back to watch the ducks splash about in the little pond down the hill from us. Seeing those beautiful ducks could always sooth me.

And after watching the cute little white ducks and throwing

sticks into the water, I walked over near the tall, green lilies and took a seat on the banks of the pond with my arms wrapped around my legs then all of a sudden, in the distance, I saw a flock of geese fly by. It was a quiet, peaceful afternoon, but inside of me there was a storm brewing destroying my soul. I felt as empty as a bottomless pit and as lonely as the whole spacious sky.

I was sitting on the grass leaning against a tall pine tree, daydreaming about Cameo, when I looked up and there he stood, only yards away staring at me with those sparkling brown eyes. My face flushed and I suddenly perspired from his sudden presence.

"Hi, you," he smiled. You have surely found your place in the sun. I have never seen you look more lovely than you do right now with those big clear eyes of yours sparkling from the sunlight." He stepped closer and his smile vanished to concern, as he looked so nice wearing his neatly pressed white cotton slacks and burgundy cotton shirt..

"You've been crying. What's wrong?" He asked, as he stepped quickly to my side and placed his hand on my arm, kneeling down on the grass in front of me.

Being that close to him just made things worse. I broke down and cried even more as he pulled me in his gentle arms, and the delicate scent of his sweet cologne overwhelmed me, as he tenderly embraced me, patting my back. He was all I wanted. But how could I confess my feelings and risk losing him? He had never given me the slightest reason to believe he wanted me as more than just a friend. If only he would grab me in his well-built arms and kiss me passionately, the way a man kisses a woman that he loves.

"Maryann, what's the matter? What has gotten you all upset like this? Tell me. Won't you? Maybe I could help," he said, pulling a white handkerchief from his back pocket.

"Here you are. Dry those pretty eyes. Girl, I don't think I have ever seen you look this sad. Are you still crying about things that happened in the past?"

I took the handkerchief and dried my eyes, nodding yes,

knowing that wasn't the reason for my tears. I wanted his kiss! I wanted his touch! I wanted his love!

He looked at me and gently held my shoulders. I could hear frustration in his voice as he shook his head and spoke in a whisper.

"You've got to stop dwelling on the past and get on with your life. You put this label on yourself. Everything you touch does not fade to black. You are a beautiful, vibrant, young woman, and you're not doing anything but wasting your life living in the past. Just let go of those sad memories.

"You need to start getting out of the house and dating again. This silly idea you have about being finished with relationships and love is just that, a silly idea. If you ask me." He paused in my eyes for just a second before continuing. "Believe me when I tell you, Maryann, there will be someone out there waiting to shower you with all the love you could ever want. Whenever you decide to open your heart to love again." He smiled and winked.

He grabbed my hand and pulled me up. "Come with me for a minute. Let's take a walk over by those wild sunflowers and sit on that bench."He pointed toward the bench.

We walked over and took a seat on the old wooden bench. And as we sat there, I couldn't believe how sturdy it was. The old bench that Dad built during the summer of 1978 for Grandma Helen and Mama to sit on while they fished in the little pond.

He held my hand and looked at me as I sat there with my head lowered.

"I won't pretend to know how you are feeling, but I have an idea." He paused and patted my knee.

"You see, Maryann, all this unhappiness and sadness took place so very long ago. And just look at yourself." He lifted my chin to face him. "You are so pretty and sweet. Not one minute of your precious life should be spent sad. Your smile is too lovely not to share with the world."

I shook my head and looked into his eyes and touched his face, "If only you knew how I felt," I said in a low voice.

He held my face with his smooth, cool hands. My eyes melted into his, and he smiled at me, as I was praying he would kiss me. But he didn't, he just said very seriously, "Maryann, maybe I do know how you feel."

My heart skipped a beat. What did he mean? Had he figured out my feelings?

"What are you saying, Cameo?" I asked.

"I'm saying that I lost someone who was very close to me also. I know I never mentioned this to you, but I lost my only sister 24 years ago. She was killed by the creep she had just married six months earlier. He pleaded guilty to beating her to death," he said sadly in a low voice.

I touched his arm. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know you had a sister."

He held my hand and continued.

"And after her death, I decided that I never wanted to hook up with anyone. I threw marriage out of the window. And I guess that's why I stayed a bachelor, and I guess that's why I never allowed myself to really get serious about any woman. But you know what, Maryann, I'm over that. I have grown up enough to realize that just because some creep destroyed my big sister, doesn't mean we are all jerks, and don't know how to treat or deserve a decent woman. See, at one time, I felt the best thing I could do for a girl was to stay out of her life," he paused in my eyes.

"But you know what? That was all nonsense. And my best friend, Terrell Paulson, who lives back in Boston helped me to realize that." He paused.

"Is he the roommate you were telling me about who used to play all those jokes on you?" I asked.

"Yes. He's the one and only. He's the one who used to hide all my socks, forcing me to go to class on many occasions sockless.

"But on the serious side, and he did have one, because he helped me to realize that I had no reason to punish myself for some other bastard's actions. Anyway, to make a long story short, that's

out of my system now. And I guess that was just my way of grieving over Linda's death," he said with a smile.

"But you're not seeing anyone right now, are you Cameo?" I asked, anxious to hear his reply.

He grinned at me and looked away for a second, then smiled and said laughingly, "Well, no. But the reason is - I'm waiting to run into that special person. And believe me, it would make my life complete to open up my heart to someone."

After a while, Cameo walked me back to the house and headed across the road to his. I took a seat on the back steps and water came to my eyes, and I thought of some of the things he had said to me. He had been through a great sad ordeal himself. He had lost his only sister, and in a very horrifying way. But he had dealt with it. He had been strong, able to push the pain out of his system, allowing himself to get on with his life. But what troubled me mostly about our talk, was the bottom line of his words. They made me cry even harder. He had stated that he hadn't run into anyone special that he wanted to give his heart to. That meant I wasn't on his list of that special "someone." Because if he loved me and wanted to be with me, wouldn't he tell me? Wouldn't he say something?

That night, right after dinner, around 7:30, I stepped out on the front porch and took a seat on the old swing with my dessert in my hand. It was a tasty dessert to say the least. Grandma Helen's homemade strawberry ice cream. And as I sit there enjoying the ice cream, slowly eating a spoonful at a time, staring out across the yard at the setting sun, my mind took me back to two months earlier when Cameo and I walked into the ice cream shop at the same time and he treated me to a hot fudge sundae. And we sat there in the little cozy shop and enjoyed the ice cream. And when I looked into his eyes it was as if I could see beyond his eyes into his mind and what I could see was something very beautiful.

My mind warmed me with thoughts of Cameo as I continued to sit there enjoying the night breeze on my face while Grandma

Helen shelled peas in the kitchen. Then suddenly a white Chrysler with dark tinted windows pulled up to the curb and killed its engine. I sat there looking and listening, then I heard a familiar voice call my name as a tall shadow stepped out of the sporty looking car and slammed the door, heading up the walkway.

"Maryann? Maryann? Is that you?" he asked.

I grabbed my chest and caught my breath, it was Paul. I sprang to my feet and sat the melted half dish of ice cream on the window sill as I rushed across the old wooden porch and down the steps into the yard to greet him. We embraced each other and I screamed and laughed with excitement.

"Paul, I can't believe you're here. Man! I'm glad to see you," I shouted cheerfully, pulling at one of his short curls. "Come inside so I can see you. Grandma Helen is going to be so happy to see you, fellow," I laughed, holding his arm and pulling him toward the house.

"Wait a second, Sis," he glanced toward the road. "I need to get my suitcase from the car. And I guess I should park in the driveway. I just wanted to make sure I had the right house," he laughed, shaking his head. "Cause I almost got lost a couple times coming around these winding roads. And Sis," he glanced over his shoulder as he headed across the yard toward his car, "These roads are narrow."

"Yeah, that they are," I grinned. "Okay, go on and get your bags and I'll run inside and let Grandma Helen know you're here."

I stood in the yard only for a few minutes, looking on as he unlocked the trunk, then turned on my heels and rushed inside, finding Grandma Helen still busy shelling peas for her canning and freezing for the winter. And while standing there in the kitchen doorway holding my mouth with both hands to keep from screaming with the excitement that was boiling to come out, Grandma Helen looked over at me and wiped her arm across her forehead. It was obvious she had worked herself into a sweat.

"Child, what are you standing there smiling about?" she

asked.

"Guess who's here, Grandma Helen? You'll never guess in a hundred years," I said in a cheery voice, and just stood there smiling until she raised both hands.

"Well, are you going to tell me?" she asked.

"It's Paul. He just pulled up and he's outside now getting his luggage out of the car," I clapped my hands and rubbed them together, jumping up and down. "Isn't that wonderful. My little brother is here! Grandma Helen! My little brother is here!" I wiped a teardrop that had rolled down to my chin.

"No kidding? That child is here? Bless his soul," she grinned happily with great joy in her eyes as she scooted the chair from the table, placing the big wooden bowl of peas from her lap to the table and stood to her feet. But before she was good and out of her chair, he had stepped inside and rushed over to hug her and kissed her on the face, swinging back and forth, hugging her for a long time.

"My baby," she said as water filled her dark eyes.

He released his arms and helped her back in her seat at the kitchen table and pulled up a chair to sit facing her, and I grabbed a chair at the table to join them. And we all sat there with water-filled eyes so blissful to see each other.

"You said in your last letter that you were coming down to see our old grandmother before the summer was out," she reached both hands across the table and held his left hand.

"And just look at you. You have developed into some young man. The last time you came down here was with your father. You couldn't have been no more than seventeen or eighteen," she said, shaking her head, looking straight across the table in his baby brown eyes. "How time flies. Now look at you. You're all grown up, and you still don't have one ounce of fat on you. And you still got that pretty smooth baby face just like you had in that picture over there," she pointed to the school day picture of Paul on a corner shelf.

"And that reminds me back to the day you were born, how

I told your folks that you should have been another girl. Cause you darn sure looked as pretty as one," she paused and pulled a napkin from the napkin holder and wiped her forehead.

Paul glanced over at me and winked. We smiled at each other, and I knew what his smile was about, her saying he looked as pretty as a girl, not knowing he was walking around trying to be one. And as I sat there smiling and tapping my fingernails on the table, we exchanged looks again and I could see that it was taking all the will power he could muster to keep from bursting into a big laugh.

"Anyway, Sweetie. I'm so happy you came. Cause I miss you kids so very much. And Paul, I tell you, this past year and a half having your sister here with me has meant so much. Now, if I could just get your father to come for a visit. Cause it seems ever since your mother passed, he hasn't wanted to set one foot out of that house and come down here and fish and hunt like he used to back when you kids were just babies. But those were the good old days. And I guess now-a-days your father is just about in the same shape your old grandmother is in. Stiff muscles and worn out bones and can hardly get around."

"Grandma, Helen, what are you talking about? You get around just wonderful. Thank God for that. And before I moved down here, Daddy was getting around fine too. So no more of that kind of talk, Grandma Helen, cause you and Daddy are forever young," I smiled and exchanged smiles with Paul.

"Yeah, Grandma, Helen. Sis is right. You look swell and with all this work you have in the kitchen," he glanced around at all the bags of beans and peas on the kitchen floor. "You seem to be getting around just swell too. And believe me, Daddy is getting around and doing just fine, except for a backache here and there. So he really doesn't have any excuse for not hopping a plane down here to visit you sometime," Paul explained with a smile.

"Maybe you're right, Sweetie. And maybe he will soon. I hope so. Cause I really miss that fellow. Cause no matter how old he gets, he will always be my baby."

Paul shook his head, "I don't know if he'll be coming down here soon or not, Grandma Helen. Because he baby sits the house now."

"He what?" Grandma Helen stared with a frown.

"Yeah. He does. I don't mean to be funny," he glanced at me and smiled and shook his head. Because making that statement (he didn't mean to be funny) was quite funny - since he was.

"But ever since the first of the year when some one broke into Dr. Valentine's garage and stole their weed cutter while they vacationed, Dad hasn't wanted to leave the house for a second.

"Jesus. That's too bad. I guess I'll have to call and talk to that old man. Cause nobody should baby sit no house. And that's for sure," she took a sip of tea.

"Yeah, Grandma Helen, I know you're right. Maybe you can talk some sense into him," he smiled.

"Are you hungry? We just finished supper a few minutes ago, but there's plenty left. I can heat you up a plate if you like"

"Grandma Helen, that sounds good. I'm hungry as a bear."

We all took a seat at the dining room table since Grandma Helen had big bags scattered all around the kitchen floor. And Grandma Helen and I had a cup of hot mint tea as we watched Paul dig into the plate of barbecue chicken, green beans and macaroni and cheese Grandma had placed in front of him.

"Grandma Helen this food is quite appetizing. You still cook as good as I remember," he said, sinking his teeth into a drumstick.

"How long are you going to visit us?" Grandma Helen asked.

"All this weekend. I might add. Now isn't that wonderful?"

Later that evening while Grandma Helen was still busy in the kitchen shelling peas, Paul and I had made ourselves comfortable in my bedroom catching up on old times. I had missed him so. It was great to visit with him.

I was sitting on my bed and he was seated in the wicker chair between the two windows. And while sitting there looking at him, I went into deep thought about how handsome, generous, sympathetic

and sweet he was and how any girl would consider him a great catch. "But, I had to keep reminding myself that he didn't like girls.

"Paul, did you ever tell Dad that you're gay?" I asked.

He stared out the window and shook his head no.

"No, Sis. He still doesn't know. And I have decided not to ever tell him."

"But don't you think he deserves to know? Shouldn't he know, Paul?"

"Why should he know, Maryann? I don't think he would understand. It would be too confusing for him. He would probably think of me as a freak and not the regular guy that I am."

But, Paul, you're not a regular guy. You're gay."

"See what I mean, Sis? Here you are a girl of the 90's, and you don't consider me a regular guy either. So that should answer your question in no uncertain terms about Daddy," he explained with a smile.

"Okay, little brother, enlighten me. Because I have never considered someone gay to be a regular guy," I paused and widened my eyes at him. "A regular guy in my book is someone who likes girls."

"Okay, Sis," he leaned forward and placed both elbows on his knees, holding his face up with both hands. "Listen. I'm gay. Yes. But being gay is a sexual preference. Nothing more or nothing less. Now I am aware that there are a lot of ignorant people out there who think being homosexual means promiscuous and having a lot of sex all the time," he shook his head and grinned. "Believe me, Maryann. That's a myth. Because someone gay is no more promiscuous than an heterosexual. And the same goes for having sex all the time. Nobody has sex all the time. And the ones who say they are having it all the time," he paused and rubbed his chin, "Well, believe me, they are probably lies. Wishful thinking on their part," he explained in such an at ease tone.

"I see. And now that we are on this subject, I would like to ask you something," I said seriously with a straight face.

"Okay, Sis. Ask away," he said, lighting up a Kool cigarette, extending the pack toward me.

I shook my head, "No thanks. I finally broke that habit when I moved down here."

"Good for you, Sis. I need to do the same," he grinned, taking a couple puffs. "So are you going to ask me that question?" he asked still smiling.

"Well, why don't you like girls, Paul? I don't mean to be so blunt. But I was just wondering."

"I never said I didn't like girls," he grinned.

"Oh, so you're bi-sexual...like Jeremy, right?" I asked.

He nodded, "That's right. And to answer your question, I do like girls. But I just prefer guys."

I couldn't help but to stare in surprised amazement at his reply.

"Yeah, Sis. I do somewhat like girls. I like their softness and gentleness. I love the way they look and the way they smell. But," he paused and held up one finger. "There's just one thing that I love that they can't give me, and it's the sensational penetration that comes from a man," he grinned and bit down on his bottom lip.

I grabbed my face with embarrassment.

"Maryann. I know this is a bit bold for you. But I just want to be open with you and let you know more about how I feel about my preference."

I rested my hands on my knees and gave him an understanding gaze. "I know. And I want you to be open. But it's just that, sitting here and listening to you say these things are kind of weird."

"I'm sure it's kind of weird to you, Sis," he smiles at me. "But that's how it is with me. I love the penetration from a guy, plus I enjoy giving penetration, and of course I can get that from a girl. But all things aside, Sis, I must be honest. I'm wild about what's between a man's legs just like you are. There's nothing like a hard cock."

I held up one hand, shaking my head. "Paul. Please. Watch your mouth."

"Sorry," he winked and glanced out the window again as a car passed down the road. "But listen, Maryann. Believe it or not, my first time was with a girl. I was about 14 at the time and Pam Nelson," he paused and grinned. "Yes. Little Pamela Nelson, your best buddy, little sister."

"Well, you don't say. Little, cute Pamela and you."

"Yes, Maryann. Pam had a huge crush on me back then. And she was stirring all kinds of feelings in me at the time, wearing all of those little skimpy skirts. But anyway, we made out in old man Nelson's basement one day after school when he wasn't home. That's when old loud mouth was hanging around Janet a bit. And one evening...."

I held up one finger, "I don't mean to cut you off. But who in the world is old loud mouth?" I asked.

"Sis. You know who I'm talking about. Who else talks louder than Jimmie Tyler? Pam and I used to call him that at the time because we could always hear his loud mouth straight outside whenever he got into a discussion about something with Janet," he chuckled.

I nodded and laughed, "Yeah, that sounds like Jimmie. He could get pretty loud at times."

"Anyway, Sis. To make a long story short, I borrowed my first condom from Jimmie."

"You what? Jimmie gave a little kid like you a condom?" I asked, shaking my head.

"Now wait a minute, Sis. I wasn't such a little kid at the time. I was fourteen, you know. I thought I was pretty hip at the time. But don't blame Jimmie. Cause Sis, believe me, he might have given me the condom, but he had no idea I was about to use it. He just gave me the condom and patted my back, saying, "Yeah, son. I think you'll be needing one of these in the not too distant future," but Sis. Little did he know that my future had come and Little Pam

and I were getting ready to heat up the basement," he laughed and took another drag from his cigarette.

I grabbed my mouth in surprise, "So you and little Pamela Nelson went all the way when the two of you were just 14? So that's why she was always asking about you. You guys were getting on more time than me," I said under my breath.

"What did you say, Maryann?"

"Never mind. So tell me, how did you like being with a girl? And when did you know you wanted to be with guys?"

"Pam was really sweet and I sort of dug her. And we would have tried it sooner, but every time we wanted to, Mr. Nelson was always home, and always cranky and grumbling about something. And whenever I visited, I remember his voice was loud and mean, and he was forever carping at Pam about one thing or another. But one evening when Mr. Nelson wasn't there, I finally talked her out of those drawers," he smiled, taking another drag from his cigarette. "And believe me, Sis. It didn't take much to get her out of her breeches. That little Pamela was hot at 14. She was good and ready. And needless to say as a nervous and anxious teenager, I wanted what was coming my way. But not long after we made out, I found out that my urge for guys was stronger. Because while at school, I would find myself more interested in being around the guys than being around the girls," he explained seriously, mashing his cigarette in the ashtray that was sitting on the telephone stand next to his chair.

"But, Paul, you didn't seem to have any bi-sexual tendencies as far as I can remember. Not one iota; so when Jeremy threw that double whammy on me, I was flabbergasted to say the least."

"Sis, if you just think back for a moment, you had to have noticed who I was hanging out with. I was with guys all the time. Did you ever see me with a girl? No. I took Pam out one time after we got it on in her basement. And that was it. And you didn't even know about that time, because we went to the movies straight from school. And that was my first and last date with a girl."

"Now that you mention it, I can remember how you hung out with guys all the time. But I didn't put two and two together. Because frankly, Paul, you don't look or act gay."

He laughed. "Maryann. You are so behind times. I guess you don't know anything about what being gay actually means."

I shook my head and smiled. Because really I didn't. But he was my beautiful brother and I really wanted to know.

"Look gay? There's no certain look about a gay person - no more than there's a certain look about a heterosexual," he looked at me, shook his head and smiled.

"So, Bro, I guess what's really important is your happiness. And if you're happy, then I'm happy for you, even if Jeremy Tellis is your prince charming," I grinned at him.

"You know, Maryann," he looked down at the carpet, then focused his eyes back at me. "I know it's been a year and a half. But I want to thank you for being such a good sport about what went down. I just want to say I'm sorry and I never meant to hurt you. But yes, Jeremy does make me very happy. And speaking of what makes me happy. I have something for you," he said getting to his feet and heading out of the door. "Wait here. I'll be right back. I have something for you."

He rushed to the yellow guest room which was three doors down from my room, and when he walked into my room with a gift wrapped in bright pink paper and handed it to me, my eyes lit up and my mouth fell open.

"This is for you, Sis. I had this printed and mounted on this wood plaque after I viewed the video tape of Cooper's funeral last month. And seriously, Maryann, it was my first time viewing it since I taped if almost ten years ago. But I'm so glad I did. Because your last words to Cooper touched me deeply. So much so, Sis, that I felt they should be mounted in a frame and hanging on your wall forever."

I quickly ripped the paper off the plaque and a flood of tears came to my eyes as I read it:

"Rest Well My Sweet Cooper

Sometimes one person can show you your beauty and its radiance that glows like the brightest star. And your self-worth that is in a place so precious that even the entire universe seems to glitter. And yet, it can all melt right before your eyes and drip right through your fingers.

Mere hands and strong wills and tears that fill all the lakes and seas and oceans alike - can't mend back together a mountain of crumbs - like the settings of suns and the force of seasons.

Two hearts that bond - even remain glued through the passing of body and soul. And the warmth and inspiration that is shared by two hearts - venture on - through the wet clouds and the passing winds of time.

Rest well my sweet Cooper. And know that, for as long as I live, you will never die."

After reading the plaque, I knew my brother loved me more than I could have ever imagined. He had captured my last words to Cooper and given them to me. A treasure I would cherish. I hopped off the bed and hugged him as I wiped tears with the back of my fingers.

"Thank you. Oh, thank you," I took a seat back on my bed, patting the bed for him to take a seat beside me.

"Seeing you smile, Maryann, means so much. You smile a lot like Mama used to smile. Good old Mama. I still miss her. Don't you, Sis?" he uttered, taking a seat beside me.

"Are you kidding me? God yes. I miss her every single day of my life. Because Mama wasn't just our mother, she was also our best friend. We could talk to her about anything. And she always had an open mind and was willing to understand," I uttered sadly.

I touched his arm, "Did she know about your being gay before she passed?" I asked.

He nodded, "Yes. I told her on my nineteenth birthday. And I remember how she listened with grace and ease. The expression on her beautiful face and the look in her eyes told me she loved and accepted me no matter what," he uttered with a smile.

"So Paul, do any of our friends know you're gay?"

He shook his head, "I don't think so," he smiled.

"But how could not any of them know? Are you in the closet, Paul?"

"Well Sis. It's not that I'm really in the closet. But in a way I am. Cause you know how private I am with most people. Plus, I don't just walk up to people and say, "Hello, I'm Paul and I'm gay."

"Well, I guess not. But gee, Bro. I know how people can gossip and I just thought that maybe the word had gotten out."

"But, Sis. Come to think about it, I just remembered that I did mention it to Pam," he uttered in a disturbed voice.

"How did you happen to mention being gay to her?" I asked.

"Well, I hadn't planned to tell her. But I told her about six months ago. I felt I had no other choice. She kept leaving letters by Dad's. And every time I stopped by the house to visit him there would be three or four letters there waiting for me from her. And in every letter she would say she was hoping we could hook up after she graduated from Michigan State. And I tell you, Maryann, as if receiving all those letters wasn't enough, she got my home number from Dad and started calling my apartment. And needless to say, a female calling there to speak to me didn't set too well with Jeremy," he explained sincerely. But when he mentioned Jeremy's name, I glanced down at the floor.

"And the last time she called and left a message with him for me, before I had that talk with her, he was waiting at the door, ranting and raving, and had ransacked the living room."

"What? He was that ticked?"

"Ticked is not the word I would use to describe his jealous

behavior on that evening. Let's just say, he was fit to be tied, cause his greatest fear is that I'll leave him for a woman."

"Why would he think that?"

"For one, my attraction for women is stronger than his. Much stronger, I may add."

I thought to myself, "Good. Maybe it will eclipse what you feel for men one day. That very private thought made me feel a twinge of disloyalty. But I wasn't bias and I respected his choice and his happiness. But my heart did wish that he wasn't gay, and this way he wouldn't have to possibly face any adversity and affliction from society, knowing how the public looked down their noses at homosexuality.

"That's for sure, and when we're out together he gets pretty jealous by my roaming eyes, flirting with the ladies. Especially when we go to some of the straight clubs over on Division and Rush."

"Well, maybe he should be jealous. Because, Bro, the way it sounds to me, it's plausible and conceivable that you could end up falling for a girl," I relayed quite strongly.

"But, Maryann," he held up one hand and shook his head. "My attraction for women may be somewhat stronger. But the bottom line is still the same. They would just end up being a one-night stand, because come hell or high water, I wouldn't be completely satisfied until I got back to that "you-know-what?" he paused.

"You-know-what? Meaning, you-know-what?" I asked.

He nodded, grinning. "That's right. So there you have it. Jeremy should realize I'm in this relationship for the long haul. But like I said, when Pam was calling the apartment, he was fit to be tied."

"Too bad Dad gave her your number," I shook my head at him.

"But, Sis. I couldn't get upset with Dad for giving her the number, because he figured I would welcome a call from a girl, since in his mind, I'm a bachelor who is rooming with a bachelor. And

anyway, Maryann, the bottom line is, her letters and phone calls became overbearing and I started feeling like a heel for not answering any of them. So I called and explained to her that we wouldn't be getting together after she finished college because I was bi-sexual. That I preferred men over women," he explained seriously.

I widened my eyes and squeezed my hands together. "So, what did she say, Paul?"

"Well, believe it or not. She didn't take me too seriously. But she did say she would stop writing and calling the house, but that I was just going through a phase and when I came to my senses and realized I preferred women that she would be waiting," he paused and smiled. "Because as she put it, the boy who made love to her in that basement back in 1985 was more of a man than any man she has been with since," he laughed. "So there you have it, Sis. The one person I tell, thinks I'm going through a phase," he shook his head and laughed out. "All I know is if I am, I love the ride and I don't plan to get off anytime soon."

I glanced at the clock on the night stand and his eyes followed. "Well, Sis, it's almost 11:00 o'clock. I should hit the hay and let you do the same," he said rising from the edge of the bed and stretching his arms over his head.

His eyes did look tired and I'm sure they were from all that driving. "Okay, Paul. I know you are probably dead on your feet, especially after all that driving. Believe me, I know how tired I was after I made the trip here. So I'll see you tomorrow morning at breakfast."

"Okay, Sis," he smiled and leaned over to give me a hug before heading out of my room and down the hallway to his room.

By midday of the next day, right after lunch, Paul and I were both all set to go fishing. We had our fishing rods and live bait sitting on the edge of the porch. And while sitting on the front steps talking and looking through some of Grandma Helen's old photo albums, before we headed to the fishing pond on Grandma Helen's property, we looked up and Cameo had walked up with a basket of

green apples that he had apparently gathered from his own trees from his backyard. My eyes melted into his as he stood near the end of the yard. He was wearing a pair of well pressed gray trousers and a pullover white top.

"Maryann. Hello there," he waved at us. "Is Mrs. Brooks home? I brought the apples that I promised her," he said with an apologetic expression on his face as if he was interrupting us from something.

"Hi, Cameo. Sure. Grandma Helen is here. Come on up," I beckoned to him.

Still seated on the front steps beside my little brother, I pointed to him. "Cameo, I would like for you to meet my little brother, Paul, who drove in from the windy city last night," I grinned.

Paul slightly elbowed me, "I wish you would stop that little brother stuff," he grinned. "It was fine when I was ten and you were fourteen. But now, Sis, look around. I'm a big boy now," he teased.

Cameo extended his hand, "How you doing Paul? I'm Cameo White, your sister's pesky neighbor. I'm the one who is always coming around to borrow a cup of sugar. I can't seem to think of sugar while I'm at the supermarket. And why should I, when I know Miss Brooks here will keep me supplied," he grinned.

They shook hands and Paul glanced across the road. "Man is that your pad across the road there?" Paul asked.

Cameo nodded. "Yeah, that's the gift my folks gave me when they packed up and sold the family business and headed down to good old Daytona Beach."

"Some gift, man. I'll take a gift like that any day. Cause I tell you, that's a very nice house. Isn't it Sis?" Paul exchanged looks with me and nodded.

"It sure is, and I have told him so many times," I smiled, looking at Cameo as he glanced over at our fishing rods and smiled, "This is a perfect day for fishing. Are you two getting ready to head to the pond?" he looked at Paul.

"Yeah, this will be my first time trying to catch a fish in

many moons," Paul chuckled.

While they were talking and hitting it off really well, I hopped up off the steps and took the basket from Cameo.

"I'll get these apples inside to Grandma Helen. I'm sure she'll be in seventh heaven to see this basket. Cause you guys just don't know. She never quits. She was up until the wee hours of the night shelling peas for the freezer. And she is still at it," I said teasingly.

A few short minutes later after I stepped back outside Cameo had left. My spirits were broken because I was hoping he would hang around for awhile and maybe go fishing with us, or maybe even the thought of us getting together for dinner. But his quick visit was just another reminder that he wasn't interested.

Almost three weeks later, after Paul headed back to Chicago, one breezy, hot Thursday night, while lying in bed, listening to a Whitney Houston cassette on my stereo, Cameo was very heavy on my mind. The house was still and quiet. The moonlight was glowing against my window pane. A dim light filled my room and the only sounds I could hear was the wind whispering through the pines and the tiny alarm clock sitting beside my bed. It was a peaceful clear, star-filled night. But there was nothing peaceful about the way I felt. Tears were rolling down the side of my eyes. I just couldn't seem to rid myself of heartache, because I just didn't seem to have the nerve to tell Cameo how I really felt.

After lying in bed for awhile, I began to feel comfortable and cozy from the cup of hot mint Lipton tea I had just drunk. Just as I closed my eyes, I felt a cool breeze across my face. My eyes blinked open, and there he stood. I rubbed my eyes quickly and stared into his face again. Then shook my head and rubbed my eyes once more - just to open them to his radiant sight once more. And as his tall, trim body stood over my bed, I had never seen him look more radiant. His light brown eyes sparkled and his short coal black hair glowed in the moonlit room.

"It's me, Maryann," he said in a whisper.

"Cameo, am I dreaming? Is that really you?" I whispered with a low voice. I couldn't believe my eyes. He was on my mind, now he was in my room. I was wordless, waiting to hear his explanation for being there. I was praying he would say he loved me and wanted to be more than just my friend.

He dropped down to his knees beside my bed, looking directly in my watery eyes, as he brought his face down to mine. He grabbed and gripped my face with both hands - giving me urgent, tender kisses. And his kisses excited me desperately.

He whispered in my ear, "I love you, Maryann, and I was wondering if maybe you felt the same way about me. I have an idea that maybe you do, but I just want to hear you say it," he grinned.

Just as I caught my breath to reply, my eyes blinked open to discover it was all just a wonderful dream. And as I laid there on my bed, all I could see was the moonlight glowing through my blinds. Cameo was not there. It had seemed so real, until suddenly water flooded my eyes, as disappointment ripped through my stomach. I grabbed my pillow and hugged it against my face, until it was wet with tears. Then I threw the pillow on the floor, threw my covers back and kicked the bedspread to the floor, hopping out of bed and flipping on the light. I stood there in my lonely room, and all I could hear was the clock ticking on my nightstand. I grabbed my face and goose bumps covered my body. He had come to me in my dream and confessed his love just as my first love had many years ago. Cameo had saturated my heart and filled me up. The love I had been searching for all my life, I had finally captured in my heart again.

The next day at work, he walked into my classroom, smiling, reaching out his hand the way he always would around ten o'clock.

"Hi, are you ready for that coffee break? I know I am," he said, loosening up his narrow, light blue tie, which complimented his dark blue suit.

I looked up slightly smiling, thinking about the beautiful dream I had; but quickly dropped my head and started stacking some

papers on my desk. Something inside of me was telling me to say no. Nothing thrilled me more than being in his company, but I was so tired of just having coffee and nothing else. I wanted him to ask me out on a real date. I wanted to be more than just his best friend. And why couldn't he see that? And why couldn't he ask me out? Maybe there was someone else in his life, and I was just fooling myself, dreaming an impossible dream that we would be together.

"I'm too busy, Cameo, and I'm not really in a coffee mood this morning. Maybe Miss Brown will break with you," I suggested, rising from my seat, heading toward the blackboard.

"I have this huge assignment to write on the board this morning." I glanced around to stare at him with my back against the blackboard, with chalk in hand, pointing toward him, "I'm all chalked up," I said in a snappy manner with a straight face.

He stood, propped against my desk, with hands in his pant pockets. He narrowed his eyes, as my sudden brush-off behavior probably threw him.

"Come on, join me. What are you talking about? You're always in a coffee mood, and what is this all chalked-up stuff supposed to mean?" he teased.

As he stood there smiling, I couldn't resist bursting into a big laugh over my own behavior, plus the puzzled look in his eyes when he asked what did all chalked-up mean. Then we both were laughing and I ended up joining him for coffee and doughnuts after all.

I wasn't talking much at the table and he noticed. He reached over to touch my hand, but I pulled it away.

"What's the matter? You haven't said one word, Maryann," he said, biting into his chocolate doughnut.

"I'm sorry. I know I'm lousy company this morning. But I'm feeling just about how my day is going," I uttered sadly, and quickly looked down.

I couldn't look up at him, I stared down at the powdered doughnut in front of me, knowing he was going to start asking me a lot of questions I just couldn't answer. And it was taking all my

willpower since my heart was overflowing to scream in his face and say, "I love you , silly fool. I love you. Just open your eyes and look into mine and see how much I love you," I longed to say those words. But something inside of me wouldn't let me.

"The day just started. What's so wrong with this Friday? I thought all paydays were good," he teased.

"I'm just having a lousy morning. And it's not a teasing matter," I snapped.

He reached out and lightly touched my hand. My eyes glanced up at his, speechless, and my mouth trembled as I stood up and ran out of the break room; feeling his eyes on my back as I ran, leaving him sitting in confusion. I knew having coffee with him was a mistake. His company and just being around him had become too overwhelming to bear. If he didn't love me and couldn't love me, I knew I had to get far away from him.

When I reached my classroom, I knew right then and there that I was in no condition to stay on at the college. I grabbed my purse and briefcase, signed out and left the class in the hands of Mrs. Fungus, the regular substitute for my class, who was always willing to fill in.

I ran all the way home, as if I was running for my life. The warm country air was so strong, it was blowing against my face, almost blinding me. I couldn't stop crying, it was as if a river had burst in me. I wanted to run into another world and somehow lock out my desperate need to be with Cameo. I just wanted to stop hurting. The need and longing for him just seemed like an impossible dream.

I fumbled with my keys when I attempted to unlock the front door. I stepped inside and the fresh smell of homemade apple pie filled the house. I placed my briefcase and purse on the coffee table, as I glanced around toward the kitchen, figuring Grandma Helen was probably in there making dinner. She always spent hours in the kitchen during the morning, making delicious homemade soups, stews and pies for later. And since it was a Friday, I knew she would be

preparing her two favorite recipes, cream corn and gingerbread.

Still breathless from the run and my overwhelming desire to be with Cameo, I flopped back on the sofa and took a deep breath, and another sad teardrop dripped from my nose. I wiped my eyes and flipped off my shoes. And as I sat there still and quiet with my pain, I could hear Grandma Helen's cheery voice singing from the kitchen. But sadness had swallowed me up, it seemed, and I didn't want her to know, so I figured I would just head to my room, but as I went to stand, suddenly I felt lightheaded as a cool chill ripped through me. It was very warm outside, but suddenly I was cold. Then within seconds, before I could get panicky, the chill was gone. But my hands trembled as I sat there in wonderment of my condition, trying to wipe the tears that had just begun to fall. Then suddenly, the large living room seemed stuffy, yet fresh summer air was blowing through all eleven open windows. I grabbed the TV Guide from the end table, and tried to fan myself. But that didn't help. I still felt faint and figured a cold glass of water would help. I rested one hand on the arm of the sofa to brace my stand, as I slowly tried to stand again. And this time I didn't feel lightheaded, but by the time I stepped halfway across the old, squeaky hardwood floor, toward the kitchen, I collapsed.

A few seconds later, my eyes fluttered open and there stood Grandma Helen standing over me, looking down at me with an expression of deep worry in her eyes.

She noticed my tears, wiping them with the damp face towel as she helped me up from the floor and walked me to my room. We sat on the edge of my bed together. She patted me on the back.

"Maryann, child, are you okay? You fainting like that, out of the blue, scares an old 78-year old like your grandmother, dear. Plus I don't know," she paused. "But you haven't been eating much lately, and I can hear you up in this old house at all hours of the night, so that means you're not getting much sleep either. I know something is troubling you, child." She patted my forehead with the damp towel again. "But I don't have a notion to what it could be.

I have puzzled my brain with what could be troubling you, but I keep coming up with a blank. But, Maryann, I know something is wrong." She paused and just looked at me.

I was sitting there on the edge of the bed, trying to keep from shaking and trying to keep from crying, as she was looking right at me. I turned to face her, and forced a smile.

"I'm okay." I rubbed my eyes. "But I'm coming down with something."

"Are you sure, dear? Coming down with what?"

I nodded. "Yes, I'm sure I'm okay. I just got too hot and fainted. You know it's 90-something degrees out there."

"Okay, I'll let you rest. But child, you call me if you need something! You hear me, Maryann? Cause, Child, you don't look good at all. And this fainting stuff scares me," she headed toward the door, walking very slowly.

"I know, Grandma Helen. But really I'll be fine. I just need a little rest," I mumbled.

"Okay, go on and get some rest. I'll peek in on you later," she stepped out of the door.

After Grandma Helen left the room, a merciless, hard pain wrapped around my soul and squeezed me with agony. Tears flooded my eyes in a way they had never poured before. I plopped across the bed like a limp rag, rolling over on my back, staring up at the pale blue ceiling as the warm, clean air floated through the open window.

I was breathless as I sniffled, lying there holding my face, crying silent tears, and with each warm teardrop that rolled down the side of my sore eyes, my mind was rewinding back to the past, and suddenly, I was filled with extreme joy, as thoughts of Cooper warmed me. The joy I had known with him, a lifetime ago was still fresh in my head and wrapped around my fragile heart. The beauty of our timeless love and the beauty of our friendship. We had shared a perfect love. And now, almost a decade later after his death, my heart had pieced itself into a whole frame, that was bursting with life

and able to receive and give again. I loved another. But deep down I knew that the all powerful, radiant love I felt for Cameo would never overshadow what I had once felt for Cooper. And my heart knew that was the way it was supposed to be. That was normal. My heart had shown me I could love again without throwing away my precious memories of Cooper.

It was wonderful to be able to think of him without feeling suddenly overwhelmed with sadness. He was my first love who was ripped right from my arms, and torn right out of my life, in the most dramatic, devastating way. And my heart also knew it was only by the beautiful, merciful grace of God that I had been blessed to love again.

And as I laid there with my eyes focused on the blue designs in the wallpaper that covered the ceiling, I couldn't stop my tears and the sniffling. At the moment, I felt like and actually knew, that my tears didn't just stem from my hopeless need to be loved by Cameo, but in actuality they were for every heartbroken thing that had ever befallen me.

The bitter guilt that haunted me and stormed inside of me for years for thinking I somehow contributed to Cooper's death. Thinking that, if I hadn't been in his life, he wouldn't have gotten kicked out of his band, which caused his great suffering and eventually his suicide.

And the mountain of rage that blazed deep in me toward the innocent others who still had their lives and Cooper's was gone.

The self-hatred of myself that had me by the throat for years and wouldn't let go, for not being able to love Cooper completely enough that he would have been content with me, so content with me that his need for "Middle Ground" wouldn't have been so great.

All these things I was crying for. But all these things had long found a home inside of me, and I had actually resolved these feelings. And I was whole again. But at this downhearted moment while lying across the bed wishing for the love of Cameo White, everything seemed dim. And I wasn't sure what it would take or if

I had the nerve to do it, but I knew it was time for me to either confess my love to him or just give up on the notion that he and I would ever be more than friends.

That clear, calm Saturday morning, as I laid with my back to the sheets, I felt as if I didn't have enough strength to throw the covers back and pull myself out of bed. And with my wet eyes focused on the ceiling, I could hear cars passing down the old gravel road. And as I continued to listen, I could hear the birds singing, a group of dogs barking in the distance, and I could hear the sound of distant laughter of the Taylor kids running and playing outside. And hearing the soothing sound of laughter only made me sadder. It had been so long since a laugh had filled my life.

Depression overwhelmed me and I didn't have the mind to get out of bed and face myself and the decisions at hand. I wasn't in physical pain, but a world of mental agony was ripping me apart. And as I laid there, staring up at the ceiling, I couldn't stop tossing and turning, thinking about Cameo. I took both hands grabbing my stomach, and screaming to myself, drowning in tears for him.

Time never stands still and before I knew it, I had been in and out of bed all day long, moping around the house. I didn't have much of an appetite and I couldn't get much sleep. There was nothing medically wrong with me. I just had a bad case of love sickness.

I had missed only a day and a half of work, but I had called the dean and informed him that I was home nursing a summer cold. I hadn't heard one word from Cameo and I kept wondering why. Then I thought, "why should he call me. There's no reason for him to call me. I'm not his woman. He's not in love with me. We're only friends. Plus, he's busy with his own life."

I wanted so much to confess my true feelings. I knew every ounce of my strength would return if I would, but something inside me wouldn't let me confess to him. I was waiting for a sign that he felt the same about me. I didn't want to go out on a limb and take a chance that could lose me even his friendship. I felt so empty

when I wasn't around him, and so complete in his presence. I was so in love with him until my every thought focused back to him. It seemed as if I lived and breathed just to think of him.

That Monday morning, after a long, miserable, tearful weekend, I could think a tad bit clearer, plus I had regained most of my strength. The weak feelings had vanished. I was sitting at the big, round breakfast table having cheese toast, country fried potatoes and onions, fried eggs and ham with Grandma Helen. And the house seemed unusually quiet, while sitting there in the big, bright spacious dining room with Grandma Helen. It had always been a treat to sit in her dining room and enjoy her great, delicious meals with the sun shining through all four windows. But this morning, nothing excited me. I was just hoping she wouldn't notice my gloomy mood. Cameo hadn't called or came over to see how I was feeling. I was thinking how the saying, "Out of sight, out of mind," must have been true in his case.

"Grandma Helen, I have decided that I'm going back home," I said in a low voice, while sipping my coffee. "I just can't stay down here any longer. I'm probably going to make plans to leave tomorrow," I said sadly, pushing my plate aside.

"You're too weak to travel, Maryann," she said with a puzzled look on her face. "And what are you pushing your plate aside for?" she said in a concerned voice. "Just look at that, Maryann. You haven't touched your food dear. There's something bothering you, Child, that you haven't shared with me. But Sweetie, I wish you would." She paused and put a fork of eggs in her mouth.

"Why are you doing this, dear? What brought on this sudden decision?" she said, taking a bite of cheese toast. " I was under the impression that you were pretty happy staying here in the country with me. I really don't want you to leave. I thought you liked your job and what about that good friend of yours, Cameo? He seems to be pretty fond of you. I know he won't be too pleased to see you pack up and leave town," she said with a sad face while still eating and drinking, obviously enjoying her breakfast.

While she spoke, I held my head down, not knowing what reason I would give for wanting to leave. I reached across the table and touched her hand, torn to see her so sad by my news, but I had no other choice. I glanced up at her, doing all I could to hold back my tears.

"I am happy staying here with you, but there is an emptiness inside of me that cannot be filled as long as I stay in this town. Things have changed for me, Grandma Helen, since I first came here."

"What about that friend of yours, across the road? He seems pretty stuck on you. He's going to hate to see you leave. Cause, Child, I tell you, since you moved here, that front yard seems like his second home. Yeah, I think he's pretty taken by you, Sweetie."

"I don't think so," I snapped quite rudely before I realized how ticked off I sounded. "He hasn't called once since I've been home sick. And you would think, since he lives right across the road that he could have at least walked over to see how I was doing. So, No, Grandma Helen, I don't think he gives a flying hoot about me, especially not the way you're thinking." I expressed as my hands somewhat trembled, "Because, just think about it. If he cared so much, he would have at least called if nothing else! Now don't you agree?"

"Yeah," she nodded in my eyes. I agree one hundred percent with those big clear eyes of yours and what they are saying. Oh, my dear, you're in love with that young fellow. I know I'm right. That's it. That's the something that's been bugging you that I haven't been able to figure out, until now."

I nodded in her eyes. I couldn't deny it. And I didn't want to deny it.

"That's why you have decided to pack your bags and go back home. You feel that leaving Georgia will help you get over that man." She shook her head. "Maryann, my sweet child, it won't. No amount of distance can erase love. Don't make a mistake, Child, and run away. Take a stand and be brave. Stay here and tell that young

man just how you feel. Cause my sweet Child, I'm telling you, he probably feels the same way about you. I'm almost willing to bet anything that he does. I haven't lived all these years for nothing. Old folks like me can sense those things."

I shook my head, "No, Grandma Helen. He doesn't care. Not the way I want him to. But you're right, 100 percent right about how I feel about him. But with things the way they are between us, can't you see, I just got to get away from here," I grabbed my face, still looking in her eyes.

"Grandma Helen, I know he doesn't feel the same about me. I just know he doesn't. For one, he hasn't said a single word, not one teeny-weeny, itsy-bitsy thing about the two of us becoming an item. And believe me, I have looked for the tiniest sign. But every time I'm around him, I leave empty handed, without one glimmer of hope that he might love me too. And it just hurts too much being around him and not being able to really be with him and tell him how I feel," I took a napkin from the napkin holder and dried the tears that had started to drip from my eyes.

"And you know, Grandma Helen, when I first moved down here, I had told myself and stressed to you that I would never be able to truly love again after losing Cooper," I paused and wiped another teardrop. "But just like that, there he was. And it happened. My heart melted and my eyes opened to witness such a beautiful man. A gentle man that brought forth instant light, that radiated throughout me like a living candle," I pointed to my chest.

"He is without a doubt the one and only man I have ever loved since Cooper," the moment I said that, a cold chill hit me and a voice in my head said - you still don't get it, do you? You don't really love Cameo White. You love Freddie Larson. Everything you feel for Cameo is what you really feel for Freddie.

"What's wrong, child? You look like you just saw a ghost."

"Oh, it's nothing. But I just had the wildest thought, but as I was saying, knowing him and loving him has given me back my life and my world as I once knew it. And it feels so good. I just

want to shout to the world how I feel," I paused in her eyes and grabbed my face again. "But can't you see, Grandma Helen, I just can't do that! I just can't walk up to him and say, 'Hey, by the way, I'm in love with you. So what you think of that?" I wish I could, but I just don't have the nerve, especially knowing he only likes me as a pal and nothing more."

"But, dear, you are only assuming. You don't really know how that man feels. He could have stronger feelings, and like I said, personally, I think he does."

"Grandma Helen. I wish I had your optimism. But I know better. And I'm really not trying to be cynical. Because God knows I would grasp for straws or hold on by the skin of my teeth for any sign from him. But he has left no stone unturned in making sure - I got no wrong ideas on how he felt about me."

"Is that so?" she nodded.

"Yes. Grandma Helen. It is so. And I don't know why you are trying to give me false hope here."

"Never. Sweet Child, your old grandma isn't trying to give you false hope. Cause I think it's the gospel truth that that young fellow cares deeply for you too. But now, I want you to know something else, I don't think he's going to say anything."

"Why not, Grandma Helen? If he really cares about me the way you are saying?"

"Because, Child, he's in the same predicament you are. He is thinking the very same thing. He thinks you only want friendship from him. And you know, Child, I'm surprised you haven't put two and two together to figure that one out long ago."

I kept shaking my head. "I don't know. He seems pretty outspoken to me. He doesn't seem timid about that sort of thing the way I am, Grandma Helen."

"Just think about it for a moment. And think back to when you two first met, and think about your frame of mind - and how every other word out of your mouth was testimony of how you wanted nothing more to do with relationships," she reminded me,

nodding up and down, while wiping her mouth and hands with a napkin. "And, child, after you tell some guy that, you think he's going to wear his heart on his sleeve and take a chance on being rejected?" she shook her head. "No, no, no, not a man. Cause, Child, if nothing else, they are all scared to death of rejection," she said, getting up from the table.

I ran from the breakfast table, leaving grandma standing there stacking dirty dishes. Her eyes showed no tears, but sadness. I hurried to my room to pack, and by the time I flopped down on the bed, she was standing in my doorway. She walked over and took a seat beside me and we embraced.

I was busy all that morning packing my things, and around 1:00 p.m., after I had packed all my belongings in six suitcases, I sank back on the couch in the living room next to Grandma Helen. We were pretty quiet at first, too sad to talk, while she sat there knitting something and halfway watching her favorite soap, "One Life to Live." Then all of a sudden, she took the remote and flipped the TV set off. She had a box of Kleenex sitting next to her on the sofa, and every once in awhile she would dab at her eyes. And it really bothered me a lot to see her cry. But what could I do? I sure didn't have the strength to give in and stay. I couldn't face losing another love.

"I'll write, I promise, and I'll also be back to visit," I grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "You know I will. But I just got to do this, Grandma Helen."

Moments after I promised Grandma Helen I would be back to visit, the phone rang. She answered it as I stood looking out of the living room window for my taxi. And when her voice lit up and said, "Yes, Sweetheart, she's here."

My heart skipped a beat cause I knew it had to be Cameo calling to speak to me. The moment I knew it was him on the phone, after Grandma Helen beckoned for me and nodded with a big heart-warming smile on her face, my gloomy face turned to smiles. I raced to the phone. It was almost like a dream. I had prayed he

would call and beg me to stay, pleading his love, but I also figured that could only happen in a dream.

"How are you? We miss you around here. It's not the same without your pretty face to brighten things up. Have you gotten over your cold? When are you coming back to work? I need a lunch partner, you know," he laughed.

He was laughing, sounding very cheerful as usual, while my heart was breaking bit by bit, by the sound of his precious voice that I probably would never hear again. I didn't know how to tell him I was quitting my job and leaving Columbus. Then, I thought to myself, yes, you need a lunch partner, but that's not enough for me.

"I'm leaving town today, Cameo."

"Oh, you are? Taking a little trip are you?" He paused, as I heard voices in the background, I could tell that he was probably calling from the phone in the cafeteria.

Then I heard him say to someone, "I'm talking to Miss Brooks now. She's over her cold, but sounds like she's planning a little trip. I'm trying to find out now. I'll let you students know when I finish talking to her.

So, tell me, Maryann, "When are you coming back? You were just going to leave without telling anyone? Shame, shame," he said in a teasing manner.

"I'm leaving town, and I don't plan to come back. I have decided to give up my job and move back to Chicago," I said in a sad voice, as big tear drops kept rolling down my cheeks.

My face was covered with tears, but I couldn't let him know it."

"What? Why? You want to run that by me again? What is this, Maryann, I've been waiting all this time to see your beautiful smile sitting across from me at work, now you tell me you're moving to Illinois. And you won't be back! What's going on? Why are you leaving Columbus? I thought you just loved living out here in the country with your grandmother. And as a matter of fact, you have only told me about a hundred times how much you love it here.

What has changed your mind, causing you to want to pack up and leave? You never mentioned you may move back. What brought on this decision, Maryann? I wish you would tell me," he said and paused.

"I also wish you would reconsider and stay."

"Why, Cameo?" There was a bit of silence as I caught my breath. "Why should I reconsider? There's nothing here for me."

"There's plenty here for you. How can you say that? I know you love your job. You love being near Miss Helen. And don't forget your pals and students at the college. Won't you miss them? Some of your students were just asking about you, wanting to know when you are coming back to work. They'll all miss you," he paused for a second. "And of course, I'll miss you too."

"No, Cameo, I have made up my mind. As a matter of fact, I'm waiting for a taxi at this moment to take me to the airport. I've got to get off the phone. I think I hear my taxi."

"No, please, Maryann, don't hang up. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. Please don't leave me."

After he poured out those beautiful words, I dropped the phone. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I wanted to shout. I wanted to scream to the world what he had just said. I grabbed my face and I jumped up and down. My grandmother stood in delight. She knew I wasn't smiling and jumping up and down for nothing. She figured it meant I wasn't leaving town or that he had said something nice to make me happy. I heard her say, "Thank God."

In the midst of my joy, I realized I had dropped the phone. Quickly I grabbed the phone and held it to my chest. I thought, this can't be happening, because I'm dreaming. I know I probably misunderstood him. I could barely get my words out. I was so nervous and very excited at the same time.

"Oh, Cameo! Do you really love me, the way a man loves a woman or just as a pal?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes! I love you, Miss Maryann Brooks, in every way possible. Does that answer your question? I'm going

crazy I'm so in love."

"My ride is beeping his horn. I've got to catch it."

"Are you still leaving?"

"No way, I'm coming right to you!"

I ran to catch the taxi, but it pulled off before I could grab my purse and get outside. Grandma Helen held the front door open for me, but the cab took off before I could step out on the porch.

"Ah, shoot, Grandma Helen, I missed that taxi. And I got to get to Cameo right now. He loves me, you know," I said excitedly, heading down the steps.

"I heard, and I'm so happy for you, Child. But I'm not surprised. I had a feeling all along that that young man loved you. It showed in his eyes every time he looked at you," Grandma Helen stated, as her voice was bursting with joy.

"I'm so happy I just don't know what to do. I'm just going to run over there."

"Don't run down that hot, dusty road; take your car," Grandma Helen insisted.

"I can't take my car. It's not here. It's over in the school's parking lot, remember? You know I ran home last Friday, leaving it there."

I started running. I was running down the road smiling. My heart felt free and filled with happiness as the warm fresh air pushed against my face, and before I could reach the main entrance to the college, Cameo had made it outside. He was standing outside expecting to see a taxi pull up, when he heard my voice call out his name.

"Cameo, I love you!"

As our bodies collided, his gentle hands lifted me straight off the ground and up into his arms.

"Maryann! Woman! I can't believe this!" He was smiling and shaking his head. "I can't believe you feel the same as I do. All this time. All these weeks and months of hoping for just one sign. This is perfect! You are perfect! And believe me, I would have

confessed my feelings if I had known you felt the same."

"That's what Grandma Helen told me. She felt you had feelings for me." I smiled with my eyes glued to his.

"Well, Grandmother was right. But I don't just have feelings for you. I love you! L - O - V - E love! You hear me. I'm in love," he shouted and looked around at the school building. We grinned at each other and he said, "Who cares if some of the faculty members walks out and sees us acting like teenagers in love here in the school parking lot. Because that's exactly how I feel." He grabbed me up in his arms and circled around once more. "And no one can put a damper on this glorious day," he grinned.

When he released his arms, I looked up in his eyes.

"I'm in love too," I said in a low, sad voice and lowered my head.

He lifted my face up toward his and grinned at me. "Why the sad eyes? We can't have sad eyes today. Tell sad eyes they better cheer up. Because Cameo White is in love with Miss Maryann Brooks," he paused and touched my chin. "The math instructor from the fifth floor," he said in a whisper - kissing my neck.

"I'm not sad, Cameo. Are you kidding? This is the happiest day of my life in many years. It's almost like I'm dreaming," I said leading him toward the picnic tables on the back grounds.

We took a seat facing each other and kissing each other back and forth every few seconds.

"Cameo, I thank God for you. Losing my first boyfriend to suicide," I grabbed my cheeks. "All I can say, is that it just destroyed my good spirit and the world as I had known it. It changed me, Cameo. It really did."

"Sweetheart, don't be so hard on yourself. We have all made mistakes and choices in life that we are not so proud of."

"It's just that, I know I hurt Troy Lake deeply. And his greatest hurt was thinking I two-timed him and dumped him for Jimmie. He thought for sure I was going to hook up with Jimmie. But he was so wrong. I couldn't bring myself to fall into the arms

of one man after just destroying another," I said sadly as my eyes focused down at the grass. And he kept listening intensely as if he could see inside of my heart.

"Then there was Jeremy, someone I have never mentioned to you. He was a real character. But I stuck with him cause I actually felt I didn't deserve anything better than the treatment I was receiving. After all, I felt it was my payback for deceiving Troy Lake. But every time I looked in his eyes, I swear there was something missing. And it nagged at me. And probably, because what I was seeing in his eyes was a reflection of what was actually in mine for him," I shook my head, focusing down at the ground. "But our relationship was nothing if not phony. A bogus display of two extremely confused people, trying to fit into a courtship that neither one of us wanted. And as far as the great annoyance about him that I just couldn't pinpoint, well, before he walked out on me I found out what it was. His love was reserved for men! And he told me so, right in my face. Right before he walked out of the door. He comes over one evening, and just out of the blue says, "Oh, by-the-way, I'm gay. I need a man in my bed and not you. So I guess I'll be seeing you. And the kicker was, the man he so desperately needed in his bed was no other than my little brother, Paul. But I didn't care what Jeremy Tellis did by then, Cameo. I just didn't want to lose contact with my little brother. And as you can see after meeting Paul, that we are still very close. We didn't let his relationship with Jeremy come between us," I paused and looked down at the grass as I took a deep breath, feeling a little bit uneasy, since I still wasn't used to the idea of Paul being gay - let alone discussing it with someone.

"I noticed that your expression didn't change when I mentioned Paul. But I was sort of wondering how do you feel about him now that I have told you he's gay?" I touched his knee. "And don't feel you have to hold your feelings back to spare mine."

He grinned but didn't respond.

"Does your grin mean you now think he's a flake. Or does

it mean you're speechless to hear this bit of information about my little brother?"

He kept grinning and shook his head, "It doesn't mean I think he's a flake and it doesn't mean I'm speechless to hear this. I'm grinning because you even asked me such a question." I met Paul and he seemed like a nice guy to me. And that's what counts, not his sexual preference," he touched my face and caressed one of my curls. "Now are we straight on that? Your brother is still cool in my book," he smiled in my eyes.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound silly. But its just that I spent my entire life up until a year and a half ago - not knowing my little brother was gay. And I'm still getting used to it myself," I squeezed his hand.

He nodded. "I understand that too," he uttered softly, lifting my right hand up to his lips to kiss.

"But you know what, Cameo? I'm so ecstatic to be able to sit here and look you in the eyes and honestly say to you and myself that all the darkness and bitterness that used to fill my heart is behind me."

I opened my purse and pulled out a small piece of white paper and handed it to him.

"Look at this. This is the poem Cooper wrote for me back in high school. This poem is very special to me. And I have treasured it since the first day he gave it to me. Keeping this poem meant my heart belonged to Cooper. But Cameo. Things have changed, and now I can give this poem to you. And not just because my heart now belongs to you. But because the same great radiance that Cooper saw in me. I now see in you. I love you, Freddie," I grabbed my mouth embarrassed when I realized what I had done. And that same deep cold chill hit me again - just like at breakfast. I slightly trembled, and my heart started racing with anxiety, because I didn't know what was going on.

"What's wrong, Maryann? You're trembling. Are you okay?"

I nodded, "Yes." And then he asked me, "Who is Freddie?"

"Oh, he's nobody. Just one of the members of the band Cooper used to sing for. I don't know how or why his name slipped out. Believe me, he's not important. I love you, Cameo. And I have lived all my life to be able to feel this way again. And now by the grace of God, I have been blessed to truly love again. And find my place in the sun with you." I touched his face.

He sat there silent for a moment reading the poem. Then he looked at me and recited a line, "You are my radiant, shining light in a world that is filled with darkness. How beautiful and special this must be to you. And to have it given to me by you - means more than I could ever find the words to say. And I promise to keep this treasured poetry for as long as I live." He paused in my eyes and folded the paper, pushing it in the pocket of his suit jacket.

"I didn't know this Cooper Valentine. But I can see why he wrote you that poem and I can see why his love was so great. Because, Maryann, you are unmistakably a vision. The person I have been dreaming about all my life. And now here you are. You are here with me," he said lovingly as his voice was bursting with excitement.

He closed his eyes and looked up at the sky. When he opened his eyes, real tears were visible in his long lashes. As we faced each other side by side on the bench, he held both of my hands and brought them both up to his lips. He kissed me gently on the fingers and placed my hands against his face. "I love you, Maryann, so much." He paused, pulled my hands from his face and kissed each palm, before placing them, slowly and gently to rest on my lap, then, he stood up and walked away from me. He stepped a few feet away, then looked around and smiled. He beckoned for me and I rushed to his side. And when I faced him - I could see real tears, that had welled up in his eyes.

"Cameo," I said - looking into his eyes, grabbing his smooth, youthful-looking handsome face - "Why the tears?" I paused in his eyes.

He pulled me in his arms and held me tight, as he spoke to me in a whisper.

"I love you. And the realization that you love me back just hit me all of a sudden. And it's so incredible, until the next thing I realized, my vision was blurred and my eyes filled with water."

I inhaled sharply and could now breathe easier. His tears were just like mine, tears of joy.

He kissed my neck and held me at arm's length. Then he reached his right hand into the inside pocket of his suit jacket, and when he pulled his hand out of the pocket, lo and behold, he held by the tips of his fingers a sparkling diamond ring! An engagement ring! But could he? Would he propose?

I grabbed my mouth with both hands as our eyes stared lovingly into each others. I was speechless and he was speechless. But as he kept holding the ring out to me, he managed to utter in the most sincere, touching way, as his eyes sparkled in a way I had never seen them before.

"Maryann Brooks, will you wear this ring? And will you be my bride?"

As I looked into his eyes, I couldn't answer. My heart was racing with excitement. But my voice had abandoned me. Cause what was happening was just like a dream to me. He had confessed his love, now he had just asked me to marry him. There was a voice inside of me screaming, "yes." But it wouldn't come to the surface. And just as I caught my breath to answer, the noise from the crowds of students leaving the college caught our attention. But we merely glanced over our shoulders and focused right back into each other's eyes.

And I answered, "Yes! Yes!" with water-filled eyes and the biggest smile.

He lifted my left hand to his smiling lips and kissed it, before slipping the precious ring on my finger. After which, he brought his tender lips down on mine and we clung to each other as if we would stop breathing if we pulled apart. And as we stood there on the back

of the college grounds, kissing each other like two teenagers, we never stopped kissing when we heard one student giggle, then lots of giggling - when one student said, "Look! Mr. White and Miss Brooks are kissing!"

They just didn't know. The whole world could have been watching us, and it wouldn't have phased us. The giggling and the pointing wouldn't stop us.

About 30 minutes later, after the college turned out and all the noise from the students and their car engines ceased, Cameo and I were still standing on the freshly-cut, radiant green college grounds. The bright evening sun beamed down, embracing the fresh air with warmth, as it slowly made its way through the tall pines and cedars in the distance, leaving glowing orange and purple colors stretched across the sky.

And, as I stood there in his arms, all the familiar sounds soothed me. The birds singing, the cars passing back and forth down the old country highway. The sounds of time moving on. And now I finally felt like my life would move forward.

Everything as far as my eyes could see on that glorious September evening looked perfect. The men playing golf along the beautiful, green hillside, the shiny red, ripe apples hanging from the four trees to the left of the building, a little kid riding his bike past the college. And everything felt perfect with my heart, and everything was perfect. I felt like I had been locked away in some dark, cold hole and had just been released. I felt free and alive. I felt like myself again.

We couldn't stop smiling as we kept kissing and holding each other. We were lost in each other's arms, until something landed on my hair. It was a pretty red and yellow butterfly, who flew away the moment I stepped away from Cameo, and grabbed my hair with both hands.

Cameo looked at me and smiled, pointing at the butterfly, as it floated gracefully in the clean evening breeze.

"There goes the big bad creature that invaded our privacy,"

he laughed.

We both started laughing and then his cheerful expression shifted to a more serious look as he glanced at his watch.

"Let's head to our vehicles," he said, then glanced at me and touched my face. "And come to think of it, that little Ford of yours should be pretty pleased to head out of this lot." He pointed toward my car and smiled at me, "Especially, since it's been parked here all this time. It thought you abandoned it, Girl," he teased.

I laughed out as I stopped at my little dusty car, and leaned against it, as he walked over to his blazer, looking around at me and smiling.

"And by-the-way, after we drop off your poor, lonely car, how does dinner at the Red Lobster restaurant sound?" he asked with a big grin. "I love their food, their salads and wine."

I glanced over my shoulder at him and smiled, nodding up and down as I pulled open my car door. Dinner with him, anywhere, would be perfect.

"That sounds very, very wonderful. I'm starving. What about you?" I asked.

He smiled and shook his head, as he stepped in his nice, clean Chevy blazer. He gave me a sexy look as he rolled down the driver's window, sticking his head out, resting his arms out of the window.

"I think you know the answer to that," he winked.

My insides warmed at all the possibilities he could have been referring to.

When we pulled into my driveway, I turned off the engine of my car and placed the keys under the floor mat, jumping out quickly. And as I slowly made my way over to him, he had walked around and opened the passenger door, waiting there for me, and helped me into the blazer.

We both waved at Grandma Helen, who had stepped out on the front porch as we were backing out of the driveway. She had a big smile on her face and a basket of fresh corn in her arms.

Cameo headed straight to the Red Lobster restaurant, one of Columbus' most sought after seafood dinner places, and before we started eating our meals, he reached out and held my left hand. His expression seemed quite serious, and I was hoping he wasn't going to start asking me questions about how I blurted out Freddie's name. Because my head was spinning about that. I didn't know why I had blurted out Freddie's name either. It was just a silly slip of the tongue, because Cameo was on my mind, not him.

My eyes widened as I stared at him and began to smile, while he was rubbing my hand.

Then he smiled, "I'm happy! I'm excited! I'm on top of the world now that I have you." He paused and loosened his tie, "But, there is something that I think I should share with you," he said, as he glanced around the cozy room, and set his eyes back on mine. "It has to do with a major decision that I made a very long time ago," he said in a serious, at ease voice, as he lifted his glass of Sauvignon and took a sip.

I reached across the table and touched his face. I could see the seriousness in his eyes.

He winked at me and looked down at the grilled salmon and steaming mixed vegetables on his plate. He took his fork and lifted a piece of fish to his lips and took a bite. And I decided to do the same, digging into my broiled orange roughy and creamy fettucini. But before I could take two bites, and just one sip of my glass of Chardonnay, Cameo reached across the table and touched my hand and smiled.

"I think I should tell you this bit of information that I have only shared with one other person, my best friend Terrell that I mentioned to you awhile back. And I would like for you to meet him someday. He's a real kidder. I'm sure you two will hit it off just great." He took another sip of Sauvignon, then held out the glass and looked at it.

"This is good wine." He licked his lips and turned the glass up to his mouth and took a larger sip.

My eyes glanced away from his when the waiter walked over and placed a basket of fresh, warm bread sticks on our table. Cameo glanced up, taking his eyes off mine for just a second. He held up one finger and said, "Thanks." And the waiter glanced over his shoulder and nodded.

We both grabbed a bread stick, breaking it in half and taking a bite.

"Maryann, what I'm going to tell you is pretty incredible from where I'm standing. How I ever managed is still a mystery to me," he said, taking another bite from his bread stick.

"What, what. Tell me already," I said anxiously, in total wonder.

Now I wondered in the back of my mind, should I tell him my secret? But my secret really wasn't a secret that I was trying to keep from anyone. But nevertheless, it was a secret to him, since I had never mentioned my being a virgin. But I had never had a reason to bring up my sex life, since he didn't seem interested in having one with me.

But now as he sat across from me, getting ready to share an obvious very important piece of information with me, I wondered very strongly if I should mention my virginity. But my second thought told me not to mention it. There would be plenty of time to tell him later. Plus, by mentioning it, it would seem like a big deal, when really it wasn't in my book. Because keeping my virginity was not something I planned. It just kind of happened.

He stared me in the eyes lovingly and sort of smiled before he spoke.

"Sitting here looking at you like this makes it extremely difficult to think about anything other than holding you and kissing you and making love to you all night," he said with a smile, looking down at his plate of food, then lifting his eyes and focusing them back on mine.

"Maryann, my beautiful, beautiful, precious Maryann, I'm still a virgin. And my best friend, Terrell, the big kidder, gets a kick out of calling me, "The Black Virgin."

Chapter Fourteen

By mid-week, I was still walking around in a daze by the sudden impact and realization of what I really felt. Plus, I hadn't gotten together with Cameo since accepting his ring. I had been putting him off with excuse after excuse.

It was now early Thursday evening around 7:00 p.m., and I desperately needed to speak to Janet. I was sitting on the bed bumping my knees together - biting my fingernails. And I stared at the phone for a few minutes before grabbing it from the nightstand, dialing her number.

"Hello," she answered.

"Janet. Hi. What are you doing?"

"Girlfriend, hello. Two calls in the same week. This is just great," she laughed. "But is everything okay? You sound pretty gloomy."

"No, everything isn't okay."

"I should have figured that, two calls in the same week, something must be awfully wrong," she paused.

"But hey, you should still be on cloud nine about the

wonderful engagement news you called me with a couple days ago. That Cameo White really sounds like a neat guy."

"Janet. Yes, he is. But there's something I omitted mentioning to you when I called and told you we had become engaged," I uttered through the receiver sadly.

"What is it now, Maryann? I hope you're not calling with no shit about this guy! And don't tell me your new husband-to-be isn't the prince he sounds to be! Cause I'll be there on the next plane if he's some kind of morbid joker pulling your strings!" she hollered through the phone in an agitated voice.

"No, no. Listen," I said loudly, trying to stop her blathering on.

"Cause, Girl, you have had too much damn heartbreak already. Cameo White better not be another faggot or some Casanova trying to string you along."

"Janet! Please! You are going on and on thinking the worst and I haven't even told you a thing."

"Well, I know it's not going to be pretty. Cause you sound like hell."

"I know. I know. But just listen. Please," I asked quite demandingly.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I'll shut up and let you talk. It's just that I worry about you."

"I know, Janet."

"So tell me what's wrong?" she asked.

"I know the real truth now. Everything is crystal clear."

"Maryann, I hope you realize, I don't know what you're trying to say."

"Cameo is still a virgin," I blurted out.

After the longest pause, she yelled with disbelief.

"He's what? Come on now! You mean to tell me your 41-year-old-husband to be. The sophisticated, affluent, mathematics genius that you have been telling me about, and are now engaged to has never had a piece? This is some heavy shit, Girl!" she laughed.

"Well, you sure don't need his ass then! Cause he sure enough can't fuck!" she laughed.

"But wait a minute, do you believe this shit?" she asked.

"That's what he told me, Janet."

"But do you believe him? But I guess you would have to. Something that profound coming from a man would have to be true."

"Yeah, it's true. His sister was murdered by the creep she married. And to make a long story short, because of that devastating incident, he vowed to live a life of chastity until marriage."

After a long pause she laughed.

"If he has never had any, I know he's good to go. You want to send him up to Chicago?" she teased.

"Janet, stop teasing. His life of chastity is not the problem."

"It's not? What could be more of a problem than getting stuck with some guy who can't screw?"

"I'm not really in love with Cameo, Janet. After the dust settled and I was in my bed last night, it came to me. I'm really in love with Freddie."

"Got damn! Maryann! One blow after another. But if you're sure, you damn sure can't marry this man. You got to level with him," she kept laughing. "And anyway, was he planning on being a priest at one time?"

"Janet, I don't look down on the fact that Cameo chose a life of chastity. Because I'm still a virgin too."

There was a long pause, then I heard the receiver on Janet's end hit the floor.

"I'm sorry. I dropped the phone," she said breathless.

"I thought I heard you say you are still a virgin."

"I'm a virgin, Janet! I'm a virgin!" I shouted bluntly.

"You're what? Maryann, holy shit! You too! This is your third engagement, not to mention all the men who have chased you, including yours truly, my hubby to be. And you mean to tell me they were all falling at your shirttail, but not one managed to get under it? Girl, I tell you, why do you always blow my mind like

this, hitting me with the most unexpected. Why can't it ever be the average run-of-the-mill type of information instead of earth shaking and mind baffling?" she started to laugh again.

"Like I said, this is some heavy shit, Maryann. I know you are one horny sister!" she laughed.

"Janet, please, it's not funny. I didn't plan to stay a virgin, it just happened."

"But, damn, Maryann! This shit is so far out it's funny. I'm sorry if I'm laughing."

"But stop laughing and tell me what I'm gonna do?"

"Well, first things first. We got to get you fixed up with a stiff one."

"Janet, get serious for a moment and tell me how can I look Cameo in the face and say I made a mistake. That's the same thing I did with Troy. I can't hurt him like that. I would rather just hurt myself and go through with this marriage. Maybe I can grow to love him."

"That's bull-shit! Maryann! If you have learned anything in all these years, I know you know better than that! The mature thing would be to just be honest with this man. Explain to him, bit by bit how you were so confused in the head all these years and how your feelings for Freddie laid dormant inside of you, afraid to surface because of your grieving for Cooper," she paused.

"You see, Maryann, if you had taken my advice and gone to one of those damn head doctors - you could have figured this shit out years ago, and you wouldn't be in this damn squeeze right now."

"But, Janet, think about it, I must be really out of my head to walk away from a pure man into the arms of a slut?"

"No, you're not out of your head, that's who you love. And like I said, a damn shrink would have figured this out long ago. And maybe you and Freddie would probably have two little rug rats running around by now."

"Oh, yeah, Freddie," I grabbed my cheek. "What if he's not thinking about me anymore? I was pretty cold to him the last time

we were together. That man has probably forgotten all about me."

"No, he hasn't. I ran into his fine ass a couple weeks ago, and he asked about you. He wanted me to give him your phone number, but I didn't think I should."

"Why didn't you? What you mean, you didn't think you should? I love him, Janet! I love him!"

"Yes! I know that now, Maryann. But two weeks ago I didn't. Two weeks ago, I thought you were head-over-heels in love with Cameo White. Plus you had made it crystal clear when you left town that you didn't want me giving Freddie your phone number or anything," she paused.

"Maryann! I sure hope you got your shit together now! Because I'm surprised you haven't gotten your ass whipped, or even shot or something! Cause you can't keep dropping bombs on the heads of men. Cause some of these guys out here will kill you for bull shit like this."

"But, Janet, I didn't plan this. Everything just came to focus the way I explained to you."

"I know, Maryann. But like I said, this is some heavy shit you're stepping around in. So what now? What have you decided? How are you going to climb your way out of this hole?"

"Well, listen. I will explain to Cameo the best way I can. Give him back his ring and come home to Freddie. No, better yet, Janet. Call over to Mark's estate and speak to Freddie. Tell him I need to see him, don't tell him why, but get him down here. Maybe the two of you can fly down in their private plane. But get him here tomorrow."

"Why? What do you have in mind?"

"The best explanation for everybody. Just do it! Please!"

"Sure I'll do it. You don't have to beg. But considering he comes. He did ask about you two weeks ago. But really I don't know what's in that man's head."

"But the bottom line is, whether he still wants to be with me or not, I got to be true to Cameo, true to him and true to myself.

Because the good thing about it, I'm finally free. There's no black shadow over me, no more confusion, no more pain, no more bitterness, no more anger. I'm my complete self again. And by being my complete self, I know I can give love and receive love - and whether Freddie wants me or not, even though I'm deeply in love with him, I'll be just fine."

"Well, good God! I think the woman finally got it together, and knows what she's doing!"

That next evening, Friday, September 15, 1995, right at 9:00 p.m., it was a warm, yet slightly breezy night. Grandma Helen was getting ready to step out the door to head to her Bingo game. But when she stretched open the door, a yellow cab was pulling into the driveway. She just stood there in the doorway.

"We have company. A yellow taxi is pulling up," she mumbled.

I hurried to the door and flew past her, stepping out on the porch. And I grabbed my chest! It was them! It was Janet! It was Freddie! They had shown! I had dared to hope too hard. But I had prayed with everything I had. And as I stood there with my heart pounding in my chest, I thought I would burst out and cry from sheer happiness, when that tall, gorgeous man emerged from that cab, and Janet had stepped out before him, but she was almost invisible to me, as I looked at him.

For a moment, as I stared out at him, as he was paying the cab driver, I was frozen in thought. My life after Cooper flashed before my eyes. Every dark episode. Every cloudy page. Every dim moment. Every sad day. And as the pages of my life began to turn in my head, Freddie was there at every glimmer of light, every sparkle of hope, every moment of warmth. He had touched my soul and hung the sun in my heart long before I knew it.

As they stepped upon the porch, I wrapped my arms around them both at the same time, as Grandma Helen stood there in the doorway, looking on.

"Oh! I'm so happy to see you two! Come on in," I said.

Janet was shaking her head, taking deep breaths, glancing around at the well-lighted front yard.

"Girl, it's so pretty down here. Just gorgeous. And look at you. You look fabulous as always. And that chic dress you're wearing is saying something. But that was a crazy ass taxi!" she pointed toward his car, backing out of the driveway.

"That ugly, big nose fucker scared the shit out of me! he was darting in and out of traffic - driving like some bat out of hell! He was shooting around your narrow ass roads so fast, until I thought I would piss on myself!" she laughed.

She poked Freddie in the chest with her finger.

"And Prince Charming here found my squealing quite amusing, cause while I was screaming my ass off trying to get that piece of white trash to slow down, Mr. Cool here just sat back smiling, acting very cool and calm as if that short, bald-headed bastard was driving just fine. I tell you, Maryann, nothing burns me more than having some taxi scare the shit out of me before I get where I'm going. Damn nitwit! I wasn't about to tip his ass!"

"Okay, enough already. Forget that driver. You guys come on inside," I said, grabbing her arm, walking her inside.

After showing them inside, I wanted to run into Freddie's arms but I merely smiled, holding out both arms, glancing at all three of them.

"Grandma Helen, these are my friends from Chicago. This is Janet and that's Freddie."

"How you kids doing?" she shook Freddie's hand and embraced Janet.

"I'm pleased to meet you, dear. Maryann has mentioned you quite a bit."

"Same here, Mrs. Brooks. She has talked her head off about you too, bragging about your good cooking," Janet said, flashing me a big smile.

Then their eyes focused to Freddie, who was still standing next to the open door, as I stepped beside him.

"Grandma Helen, you see this good-looking guy right here. This is the man I really love."

"How are you doing, Freddie?" she extended her hand to him, shaking his hand again, glancing her eyes back to me.

"What did you say? Child?"

I exchanged looks with Janet, because how could I explain this one?

"Mrs. Brooks, I think you should sit down for this one! Cause Maryann here is about to lay some heavy shit on you, Grandma," Janet uttered under her breath, then grabbed her mouth to cover her grin.

Grandma Helen glanced at Janet.

"What was that, dear?"

Janet shook her head, pointing toward me.

"Grandma Helen, it's so hard to explain myself. But I guess I'll start by saying, all the confusion is gone," I spoke with a very clear, assured voice.

"What confusion, Child?"

"Did I hear you say you loved that young fellow that's standing beside you?"

I nodded in her eyes, "That's right. It's Freddie I'm really in love with, not Cameo."

"But what about?" she pointed to the ring on my finger.

I glanced down at my hand, lifting it with my right hand, staring at it for a moment.

"Oh, yes, this ring. I'm giving it back to him tonight and will try to explain how all this happened."

Her eyes widened. "Well, I wish you would explain it to me," she pulled a Kleenex out of her purse, slightly trembling, patting her forehead.

I had startled her. She closed the front door, taking a seat in the nearest chair.

"That poor fellow is going to be crushed. Child, how did you mope around here all these months for that sweet man across the

road, just to get him to say he loves you, then bam! He's out! Just like that! I don't mean no disrespect to your two friends here. But I don't understand what's going on here, Child," she stressed strongly.

I stepped to her side, dropping to my knees in front of her, resting my hands on her knees.

"Grandma Helen, I'm sure you don't understand. And I know all of this sounds complicated like crazy. But what's going on here is honesty. I love Freddie with all my heart, and I have loved him for a very, very, very long time, Grandma Helen. But God knows I didn't realize it until the night of the day Cameo proposed to me. Everything I thought I felt for Cameo was really what I felt for Freddie," I paused to wipe a tear that had rolled down the side of my eye to the tip of my nose.

"And like I said, I know what I'm saying has bewildered you. But really, it's very simple. I got my life back, Grandma Helen, and I have a clear head now, and I know who I truly love! And that person is that man standing right there!" I stressed strongly, pointing to Freddie.

She looked at me for a moment, shaking her head, then a slight smile came to her face as she took her hand and rubbed the side of my face.

"My Lord, Child. I gotta tell you, I have never heard of such a mess in all my days. And we all know how long I have been around. But that look in your eyes says it all. That look goes deep down to your soul, Child. It's a noticeable assurance, that radiates you. And I gotta tell you, I haven't seen that kind of look in your eyes since you been down here," she glanced over at Freddie.

And as her eyes focused on him, I glanced over my shoulder at him too. He smiled at us, as he was standing there dressed sharp as usual, wearing a hunter-green two-piece blue jean outfit that fitted his trim body perfectly. And his soft shoulder-length black hair was styled nicely with a part on the side, sweeping across his broad shoulders.

"So, if that young man standing there is responsible for this glow on your face, then God bless his sweet soul. But sweet Child, I just hope you know what you are doing. But as long as you are happy, that's what really counts," she rose to her feet, with purse in hand, heading toward Freddie, giving him a hug.

"Well, kids enjoy yourselves. I got to get to that bingo game. Janet and Freddie," she glanced at them both and smiled, "It was nice to meet you two. Make yourselves at home. There's lots to eat in the fridge. Make Maryann heat up some of that food for you," her voice faded as she headed out of the door.

As I watched her get into her car and head out of the driveway, it dawned on me that I had confessed my love for Freddie to Grandma Helen, not really knowing how he really felt about me. But somehow that didn't seem to matter. And before I could close the door, I noticed Cameo headed across the road toward the house. I glanced at my watch and it was already a quarter after. I had called and asked him to come over around 9:15, knowing Grandma Helen would have gone to her bingo game by then.

I pulled my head back inside and looked around at Freddie and Janet.

"Guys, Cameo is coming up the walkway now. I'll talk to him in the kitchen."

They nodded with straight faces, realizing this was a very serious, touchy matter. I was quite anxious, and I'm sure they were too. And Freddie maybe more than Janet and I. Because from his stand-off behavior, he didn't seem overly pleased with the situation, acting very cool, keeping real quiet, taking a seat near the corner of the room in a straight-back wooden chair. And as I stood near the open front door, I glanced over at him and flashed him a smile and he winked at me, shaking his head as he lit up a cigarette.

Seconds later, Cameo stepped into the living room smiling. And I closed the door behind him.

"This is my best friend, Janet, that I was telling you about."

Janet hopped off the sofa and shook his hand. And her eyes

said a million things, but she knew I had told her to keep her lips zipped.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Cameo," she was grinning, and he nodded likewise to her.

I looked toward Freddie who remained seated over in the corner.

"That's Freddie over there. He's from Chicago too."

"How you doing, man?" Cameo spoke.

Freddie held up one finger, taking a puff from his cigarette, blowing smoke, nodding up and down, not uttering a word.

I lead Cameo into the kitchen with my heart in my throat. I stepped across the shiny waxed kitchen floor with my head down, and as the door swung closed, I leaned up against the sink with my head still lowered. And as I glanced up at him to say something, he spoke.

"Maryann, I get the strangest feeling that you asked me over here for something that I'm probably not going to want to hear. Because since we became engaged, we became estranged," he gripped my shoulders and stared down into my eyes.

"I love you so much, Maryann. You have filled me up. You made me so happy when you accepted my ring and said you loved me. I hope you're not about to tell me any different," he brought his mouth down on mine. But I was like a board. I couldn't kiss him back.

He released me, stepping back, shaking his head.

"So you are about to tell me different? What in the hell is this? Speak! Your silence is driving me up the wall."

As I stared at his confused eyes, I wiped a tear drop from my cheek. And he stepped closer and wiped my tears with his smooth fingers.

"Maryann. Why the tears? You know I love you. I waited all my life to fall in love with someone like you. You are so beautiful. But your humble kindness touches me even more than your rare beauty."

"You are kind and beautiful too. And I love you too, Cameo."

"Well, what's the problem?"

"The problem is that man in there," I pointed toward the living room door, connecting the kitchen.

"What man?" his eyes shifted toward the living room door. "The one you just introduced to me in there with your best friend?" he glanced down at the floor, pushing both hands in his pants pockets, focusing back in my eyes with a more serious look.

"Freddie is his name? What about him?" he asked, then paused and hit his forehead, as if something had just crossed his mind.

"What about him, Maryann?"

I took his hand and led him over to the connecting door, and pointed to the peephole.

"Look through there for a second," I asked him.

He peeked through the peephole for a second, glanced around, holding out both arms.

"What did you have me do that for?"

"Who does he remind you of?" I asked.

"Remind me of? What do you mean? I don't even know the man. He doesn't remind me of anybody."

"Yes, he does. Take another look."

"Look, Maryann. I'm not interested in peeking out there at your friends. Now what is the problem with this guy that's causing you to stand here and cry?"

"I'm trying to tell you. Just peek out there again."

"Okay, why not?" he peeked through the peephole quickly.

"Okay, I've looked out there twice. Now what gives?"

"Who does he sort of look like to you?" I asked.

He stared in my eyes long and hard before he answered.

"Me? He sort of looks like me, I guess beneath all that hair."

I slapped his shoulder, "Yes. You got it. He does sort of look like you. And when I ran here from Chicago, I wasn't just

running from the sad memories of Cooper. I was also running from that man in there," I pointed toward the door again.

"I don't get you."

"What I mean is," I mumbled in a low voice, "I was running from my feelings for him."

Cameo caught his breath and coughed a couple times to clear his throat, cause from the look in his eyes I had just startled him.

"Maryann, get to the point before you give me a heart attack."

"Okay, the point is, when I met you, I fell for you immediately. And the first thing out of my mouth was that you bore a striking resemblance to Freddie. Remember?"

He shook his head, "Can't say that I do."

"Remember, I asked if you had any relatives in the Chicago area by the last name of Larson?"

He kept shaking his head.

"Try and think back! You must remember! It was the first thing I asked you."

"Look! Maryann! I can't remember, okay? You have laid a lap of shit on me like this! And you expect me to remember something you asked me a year ago! Right now the way my head is spinning with all this bull-shit you're laying on me, I'm lucky if I remember my own name!"

"I just thought if you could remember that incident, then maybe it could help to shed a little bit of light on this situation for you."

"Maryann, the only thing that's going to shed some light on this situation is you! So get to the damn point! Please!" he said in an even tone, but an angry voice.

"Okay, I'll get to the point. It goes like this. You see, Cameo, I fell for you, but every feeling that was hiding inside of me for Freddie surfaced itself on you," I explained in his eyes.

"So, in other words, let me get this shit right! What you're trying to say is, you were really hung up on me because I reminded

you of the guy you were really hung up on? But of course, you hadn't figured that out, until I made a complete fool out of myself and proposed to you?" he inhaled sharply. He shook his head, turning his back.

"Why Maryann? Why did you accept my ring? Why did you seem so sincere? Why did you say you loved me?" he faced me with water-filled eyes.

I grabbed his face and rubbed his cheeks.

"Cameo, because I was sincere. I had never been more sincere about anything in my entire life! But like you said, I didn't realize my sincerity was for Freddie until later that night in my bed."

He jerked his face from my hands, turning his back to me, hitting his fist in his hand, kicking the throw rug near his foot, stepping over to the stove, where he rested his hands, facing the stove. And I didn't say another word until he nodded with his back still to me.

"And as you were saying? Go on, I'm listening," he mumbled in a crushed way.

"It became so crystal clear. I love that man in there, Cameo. And I didn't even know it. And you know better than anybody how my head has been so clouded for so many months. But can't you see, Cameo! On the top of all this confusion! I have finally risen to the top! I'm finally in the clear. I know who and what I want," I paused.

"But listen, Cameo. I do love you, just like I said. But what I love is our special friendship," I said, stepping over near the stove to face him.

"And I know you may not want to remain friends. But after you have gotten over this blow, I hope you'll write some time. Because we are more alike than you think. I'm a virgin too."

His eyes widened and he just shook his head without uttering a word, stepping over to the kitchen table, pulling out a chair, taking a seat with his elbow on the table, holding up his chin.

"Cameo, I'm so sorry about everything! Really I am. You

are so sweet. So kind. So handsome. And I respect you so much. But I think you already know that. Just like I think you know deep down that I didn't mean to hurt you. Oh! My God! Cameo! Really I didn't!" I grabbed my face sobbing.

"I didn't mean it. And I wish you could see this from my eyes. I have traveled a very long, rocky, very sad road. And I have finally reached the end of walking over all of those thorns. I'm finally clear about my direction, myself and who I love!"

He rose to his feet, gripped my shoulders and held me close.

"I'm not angry with you. I believe you. I believe you one hundred percent. But I can't hide this hurt and this anger in me! Cause I wanted to be that special someone who made you laugh! I wanted to be that person who made you happy! I wanted to be that special someone who made all your dreams come true! Only because I love you so," he paused in my eyes as I wiped a tear with the back of my hand.

"Listen, Maryann. I respect you so much also. And, beautiful lady," he glanced down at the floor for a second, then focused back in my eyes. "If you have finally gotten rid of that bitterness and sadness that used to rip at you, that was so heavy on your lovely shoulders when I first met you, then I'm happy for you. I'm just so damn sad for myself," he slightly smiled.

"But, Hell, I'll be okay. But listen," he touched the side of my face. "I won't be able to stay friends with you and write you. Buddy, buddy. I don't think so. I'm sorry. I just couldn't bear that," he paused, patting my back. "But maybe I'll walk over and ask Mrs. Brooks about you sometime."

"Thank you, Cameo for understanding," I reached into my dress pocket and handed him his ring.

He just stared at the ring for a second before he reached out and took it, placing it slowly inside of his shirt pocket. And a tiny smile came to his face, as his kind eyes were still filled with water.

"If the Gods are good to me, maybe I'll run into another angel like you to give this to."

"I know you will, Cameo," I smiled back at him.

Seconds later, after we looked at each other for the longest time, he gave me a kiss on the face, then he stepped over to the back door, gripped the doorknob and pulled the door open. But before he stepped outside, he paused in the doorway, pulling out his wallet, from which he removed a white piece of folded paper.

"I almost forgot. But I think you'll want this. I'm sure it was meant for you-know-who?" he handed me the paper, which I placed in my dress pocket, and we nodded in silence at each other as I slowly closed the door as he walked away.

I stepped into the living room to find Janet sitting on the sofa flipping channels on the TV and Freddie was still sitting in the corner smoking, paging through a Jet magazine. But they both stopped what they were doing, standing quickly, walking toward me.

"So what's up?" Freddie asked. "Where is...?"

I cut off his question.

"He's gone. It's over. I explained to him that I really love you, Freddie. And that's true. I love you so much," I gazed into his eyes. "And even though you may not feel the same, I had to level with him and now I'm leveling with you."

He grinned. "You're right. I may not feel the same. It's been a helluva long time. And I'm sure canceling a gig where I could have earned I guess right around $4,000 for two and a half hours of work and hopping a plane at a moment's notice, I'm sure I would have probably done that for anybody," he smiled.

"So does that mean what I think it means?" I asked.

"Hell, yes, it does. Now get those lips over here."

I stepped near him and his familiar bold fresh cologne sent heat ripping through me. Just the thought and the presence of him tingled me all over.

We gazed into each other's eyes for a second, before he placed one hand behind my head and one hand under my chin, placing his smooth lips over mine, placing his demanding tongue inside of my mouth, moving it around. Then moving his tongue ever

so gently outside my lips, licking easily, then sucking gently my bottom lip, then touching the sides of my lips with both hands, as he kissed the outside of my lips tenderly, then urgently pushing his tongue back inside of my mouth, gripping my face, swallowing me up, urgently! And all the while, breathing heavy and we both were making sweet craving sounds.

"You two better cut that out! Because I'm gonna need a fan myself in a minute," Janet said, grinning.

Then he pulled away, breathless, licking his lips.

"Mmmm, I want more of you," he said in a low, sensuous voice. "Which way is your room?"

I pointed toward the long hallway.

"It's down the hall there."

He winked at me. "Well, lead the way. We are finally together and I think you know what comes next," he grinned, exchanging looks with Janet, who had taken her seat back on the sofa, flipping the TV back on.

I just stared in his eyes for a moment.

"Well, any objections, Maryann?" he asked.

"No. I want to be with you in that way too. I love you. But before we head to my room, I just want to say, before you and before Janet. I love you, Freddie. And I'm not looking for the stars or no big promises. And I realize your interest in me may not be as strong as my interest for you. But that's okay too. Because for once again in my life I'm truly in love! And I just want to be with you, that's all that matters."

"Okay. Well said. Now lead the way, pretty woman, cause I want that body. Like now!" he said in a low voice for my ears only.

As we headed across the living room floor, toward the hallway to go to my room, through the corner of my eye I saw him exchange sneaky looks with Janet. Maybe they were laughing because I had finally fallen in love again, with a man who only wanted to screw me, dumping the one who truly loved me and

wanted to give me a life-long commitment.

The moment I shut the door, he didn't kiss me or anything, he just pointed toward the bed.

"Let's get right to this," he started unbuttoning his shirt.

"Okay, I'm ready. I can't wait to get in that bed with you, Freddie."

I stepped out of my low beige pumps, quickly unzipping my ankle-length peach dress, pulled it off my shoulders, stepping out of it, while he was in slow motion just staring at me, still unbuttoning his satiny red shirt.

After stepping out of my shoes and dress, and pushing my silky slip off my shoulders, standing before him wearing only my soft beige underwear, he held up one finger, then squeezed his hands together.

"Got damn! This is driving me crazy!" he turned his back for a second, turning right back around. "Jesus! Woman! You're so damn fine!"

"Well, if I'm so fine, why are you still stuck on the third button?" I smiled, gazing into his deeply sensuous eyes.

And as I reached back to unsnap my bra, he shook his head.

"Don't! I'll help you out of that and those," he pointed to my panties, and inhaled sharply, as deep desire showed in his eyes. "Just turn the covers back and hop in."

I smiled, and stepped over to my bed.

"Okay, Freddie, I'm dying to do just that," I glanced around flashing a big smile. "But the rate you are going, looks like I'll be hopping in alone."

I threw the bedspread back and lo and behold, lying there on the white cotton sheet was a four carat sparkling marquise cut emerald ring! For a moment, I was in a daze just staring at the glimmering ring, before grabbing it, turning to him with it dangling at the tip of my fingers.

"Is this from you?" I managed all smiles, grabbing both cheeks.

He nodded, "Yes, it is," stepping toward me, slowly slipping the priceless gem on my finger, "I had Janet sneak back here and place it under your covers while you were in the kitchen talking to what's his name? And I know this is a fairly big house, but it didn't take her long to spot your room."

I just stared in his dreamy eyes speechless for a second, then I shouted, blissfully, hitting his shoulder in a playful way.

"I guess that's why you two were exchanging those sneaky looks," I grinned, breathlessly astonished.

"But, Freddie. You didn't have to. A ring from you, what does this mean?" I asked in his radiant eyes.

He grabbed my face so tenderly.

"It means you're my woman. Now put on your things and let's blow this joint. I'm taking you back to Chicago with me tonight," he said, reaching down to pick up my clothing, handing them to me.

"But what about what we were about to do?" I glanced toward the bed.

He winked at me, taking a rubber band from his pocket, placing his long, flowing hair in a pony-tail.

"I think we can wait one night, until we meet with the justice-of-the-peace tomorrow. Then you can say bye-bye to virgin life!" he grinned.

I was stunned, slipping into my dress, quickly zipping it up on the side. Then I grabbed my face, speechless for a second, how did he know about my virginity?

"Are you asking me?" he placed his finger against my lips, nodding, bringing his smooth lips down on mine, tracing around my outer lips with his finger, kissing each spot he touched.

"Yes, sexy woman I am. Now grab a suitcase quickly, because we got to hustle to catch that midnight plane."

I nodded, frozen to his sexy eyes.

"Freddie, I'm overwhelmed! I'm ecstatic! I'm overjoyed! I can't believe this is happening! We're getting married? You and

I? I love you and you love me?"

He kept nodding with that sensuous smile.

I grabbed my head. "Okay! Let me think! Let me think! I can't think! I can't think! I'm so thrilled I can't think. What am I supposed to do right now?" I laughed blissfully.

But he stood there as cool and as sexy as ever, smiling, very amused at my overwhelming excitement.

"Well, it would help if you located a piece of luggage so we can hit the road," he grinned.

"Yes, that's it. Luggage! I need luggage," I screamed excitedly, hurrying across the room to the big double-door closet, swinging open the doors, pulling out the first suitcase I spotted.

I placed the suitcase on the bed, and quickly started pulling clothing out of my dresser drawers by the armfuls. And while I was running around like a chicken with its head cut off - in a rush trying to pack, Freddie was smiling, sitting on the bed next to my suitcase, picking up and looking at some of my nighties, bras and panties.

"Girl, you got some sexy garments over here. Especially this hot pink set," he grinned.

I grabbed my mouth, laughing for a second, then flew to the bedside and grabbed the nighties out of his hand.

"Don't do this."

"Why not? You got some sexy stuff here, and I'm digging it," he grinned.

"I'm just sort of shy about you putting your hands in my undergarments over here."

He nodded with a devilish smile on his face, with his eyes staring up at mine, taking a pair of purple silky panties and rubbing them against the side of his face.

"Girl, this material feels awesome against my skin."

My eyes widened and my face warmed with embarrassment, then he merely dropped the panties back in my suitcase.

"Okay, case closed," he grinned.

I could breathe easier. "Okay, good. Now don't let me see

your hand near my suitcase going through my undergarments again," I grinned at him, pointing my finger in a playful way. Then leaned over to give him a kiss on the face, and he grabbed my hand.

"So you're too shy for me to put my hands in your undergarments in that suitcase, I see," he said, smiling, as his smooth hands were slowly sliding my dress up.

"What about if I put my hand inside of these undergarments?" he asked as he easily pushed my dress up to my waist, holding it there with one hand as he looked long and hard at my panties, and I was tingling all over waiting for him to slide them down and touch me with his hand. But his slender fingers shivered with the elastic, and he let my dress fall, gripping my hips, pulling me next to his chest as I could feel his heart pound with desire.

Seconds later, after he caught his breath, he gave me a slight push and I made two steps back.

"God Damn!" he hollered. "I want to get between your legs! I'm dying! I'm dying!" he hollered. "But I promised myself I would wait until we said 'I do!' And I be damned if I don't! I just got to keep reminding myself that I'm not an animal here! That I have will power!" he looked at me grinning, shaking his head, then lightly slapped my behind.

"So run along and get your things together before I lose my will power and we'll never catch that midnight plane.

I was grinning at him now, just like he was grinning at me before when I was all excited running around in circles. Now Mr. Cool was all excited. And it warmed my heart to see him so ecstatic like me.

In twenty minutes I had packed two pieces of luggage and left a note on my dresser for Grandma Helen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jel D. Lewis (Jones), a resident of Illinois. She started her professional writing career in 1988, freelancing her work to a variety of magazines, finding award-winning success with the submission of her short stories, poems and relationship articles. And when her first book, "The Naked Girl" hit the market, January, 1993, it was a triumphant debut.

This is the author's third romance and she's hard at work on her fourth, "The Man Pleaser."

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